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## **2. INCLUSION: HOW CRUCIAL IS TEACHER EDUCATION? SPECIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND RECRUITMENT AS NON-TRADITIONAL FACTORS OF INEQUALITY FOR THE QUALITY OF INCLUSION IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT**

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### **Abstract**

The role of schools in achieving an ever-higher degree of social justice is internationally recognised: hence the need to assume equity as a pedagogical horizon of meaning to improve people's life trajectories through education. Nevertheless, various inequalities impact on students' paths: we propose the category of non-traditional factors of inequality to understand how school systems and schools create inequalities. We fit into the international debate on the shortage of specialised special needs teachers; our aim is to understand how and why special teacher education and recruitment are configured as non-traditional factors of inequality. Our focus on the Italian context allows us to give a contextual interpretation of the phenomenon. After an excursus on the legislation in terms of special teacher education and recruitment, we analyse the results of a study conducted between February and April 2023 to understand (1) if and why special teacher education and recruitment can be considered non-traditional factors of inequality that undermine inclusion quality and (2) what teachers' and parents' perspectives on the phenomenon are. After a data analysis using the Ministry of Education and ISTAT databases, two asynchronous online focus groups were conducted in two Facebook communities with parents and teachers. Ministry of Education and ISTAT data confirm that special teacher education and recruitment are non-traditional factors of inequality; the testimonies collected in the focus groups also reveal distorting dynamics in terms of equity and inclusion quality. Therefore, reflection is needed (in Italy but not only) to make special teacher education and recruitment more effective.

**Keywords:** *school; equity; non-traditional factors of inequality; inclusion; special teacher education*

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### **Introduction**

This paper is part of the international debate on the shortage of special needs teachers; in particular, it explores the issue of special teacher education and recruitment as dynamics that give rise to this phenomenon. Within the theoretical-conceptual framework of equity in education, this dynamic is seen as the cause of inequality among students created by school systems and schools due to national educational policies and the organisation of individual institutions.

Firstly, we develop a theoretical-conceptual framework on equity and social justice in education, positioning ourselves among the different interpretations of these constructs. Again, we introduce the interpretative category of non-traditional factors of inequality to place school systems and schools under investigation and understand how they give rise to inequality dynamics through the classroom actions of teachers, the governance of individual schools and national educational policies.

Secondly, we focus on inclusion quality and use the framework developed to read special teacher education and recruitment as non-traditional factors of inequality. In fact, their procedural ineffectiveness produces a shortage of specialised special needs teachers at the international level, with the necessary recourse to non-specialist figures who lack the skills to be those contextual agents of change to make schools environments fit for the people who live in them.

Thirdly, we focus on the Italian context: in the face of cutting-edge legislation on inclusion and well-defined special teacher education and recruitment procedures, problematic dynamics emerge precisely due to the shortage of special needs teachers. Having investigated the issue thanks to the literature on the subject, we examine the results of a study conducted in Italy between February and April 2023: a data analysis conducted thanks to the databases of the Ministry of Education and ISTAT and two subsequent asynchronous online focus groups conducted in two Facebook communities with teachers and parents allowed us to understand if and why special needs teacher education and recruitment are configured as non-traditional factors of inequality and what the perspectives of the different actors on the issue are.

The focus on the Italian context, besides allowing a contextual reading of the phenomenon, allows us to elaborate reflections that can be extended to those international contexts that share similar problems and similar educational policies. The interpretation of the problem within the theoretical framework of the non-traditional factors of inequality facilitates us in thematising the issue of the quality of inclusion as a systemic problem.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Social justice, equity and inequalities in education***

The role of education in achieving an increasing degree of social justice is internationally recognised (OECD, 2012; UNICEF, 2013; 2021), sometimes even in the form of political engagement for a more equitable and sustainable future (UN, 2015). It is about building a more cohesive, democratic and inclusive society in which all are actors in History and active participants in the participatory processes of citizenship (Adams, 2007; Bell, 2007; Gerwitz, 2006; Griffiths, 2003; Hackman, 2005). Therefore, taking equity as a horizon of pedagogical meaning becomes unavoidable (Ainscow, 2020a; 2020b; Jurado de Los Santos et al., 2020): it is necessary to ensure that everyone has an excellent education for the acquisition of the capabilities to exercise citizenship in terms of active participation in political, social, cultural, economic life on the local and global levels without diversity turning into inequality (Ferrero, 2023a).

These ideals are shared internationally, but it is difficult to realise them (OECD, 2023; UNICEF, 2018). Social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1966; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; don Milani, 1967) is still active: in fact, in most cases children replicate their parents' educational, professional and personal paths without being able to change their socio-economic and socio-cultural status. Parents' economic situation and educational level are causes of inequality that

are external to the school and are considered as classic. However, there is a need to move beyond this interpretation and focus on the role of school in producing inequalities (Mayabi, 2015; Thompson, 2019), as also affirmed by the ethnography of education (Florio-Ruane, 1989; Gobbo, 2011; Goldring, 2002). Here, we propose the interpretative category of non-traditional factors of inequality, introduced by Ferrer-Esteban (2011) and later deepened by other studies (Ferrero, 2023b; Granata & Ferrero, 2022; Mincu, 2015), to investigate the action of school systems and schools in producing inequalities.

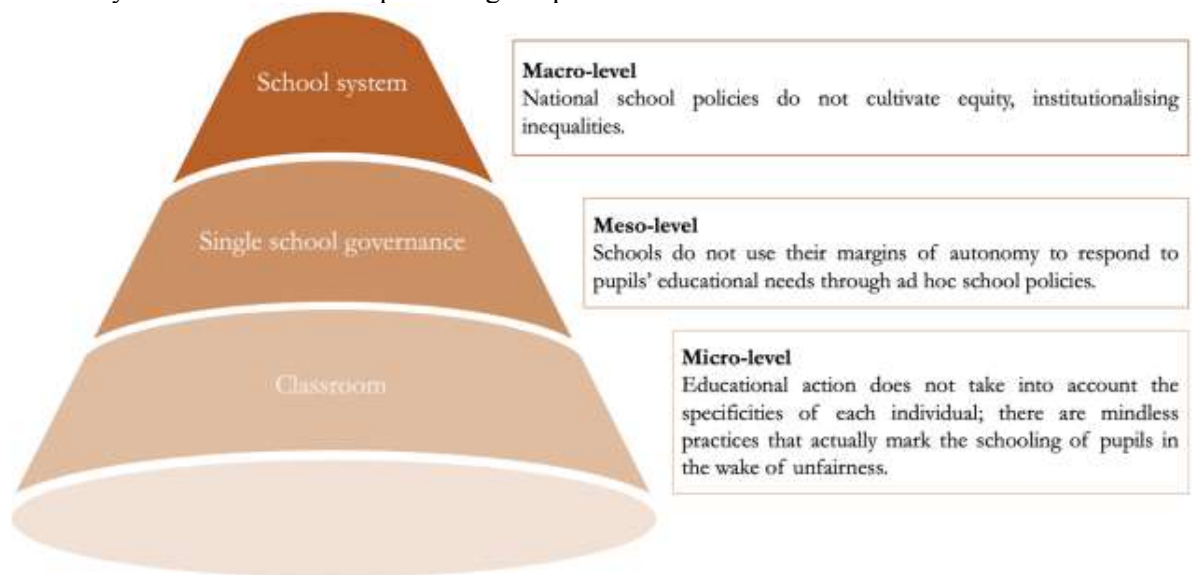


Figure 1. Non-traditional factors of inequality (author's elaboration)

Non-traditional factors of inequality originate due to the organisational culture and functioning of school systems and schools: they produce disparities between pupils that affect both different institutions and classes within the same school, depend on everyday educational practice, individual school governance and national educational policies. Ecological model by Bronfenbrenner (2009) is useful to explain the different level of origin of these dynamics and the responsibility of school systems in producing disparities between pupils (Figure 1).

The dynamics of inequity can originate at different levels (Boeren, 2016; 2019); reading the interrelationships between the various spheres is crucial to understand the effect of non-traditional factors of inequality on pupils' educational pathways (Giddens, 1984). At the micro-level we find inequality dynamics taking shape in the classroom, i.e., in the environment directly frequented by the student. Then, at the meso-level we have inequalities that originate at the institutional level. Finally, at the macro-level we have inequalities created by the socio-political and cultural system in which the student lives, thanks to educational policies that are not really oriented towards equity. In particular, here we focus on inclusion by investigating whether special teacher education and recruitment can be seen as non-traditional factors of inequality that undermine its quality.



***The role of special teacher education and recruitment for inclusion quality***

Inclusion is not to be understood as a goal achieved once and for all, but as a process that modifies contexts so that they adhere to the specific needs of the people who experience them (Gordon-Gould & Hornby, 2023; Hornby, 2014). In this way, we go beyond the logic of deficiency, which only shows the students' weaknesses, by thinking in terms of enhancing the potential of each one. Thus, the special needs teacher is an agent of change and not the assistant of a single child (EASNIE, 2012); therefore, special teacher education assumes a fundamental role in promoting this vision of school and this professional habitus in future teachers (EASNIE, 2020).

Nonetheless, there is an international shortage of specialised special needs teachers (Payne, 2005; Sutchter et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007): this situation produces worsening effects on the quality of inclusive processes in schools, as inadequately trained people are employed to modify school contexts with a view to personalisation and valorisation of everyone's strengths, without focusing on disability or, in general, on what is missing. In addition, recruitment procedures produce frequent turnover (Bulger et al., 2015; Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Guarino et al., 2006; Zascavage et al., 2008), with a negative impact on educational continuity.

Special teacher education and recruitment can be considered non-traditional factors of inequality. They originate at the macro-level, but have effects on the organisation of individual schools (meso-level) and obviously on the school experience of students (micro-level). Ultimately, they worsen inclusion quality.

***The role of special teacher education and recruitment for inclusion quality***

Italy is at the forefront in terms of inclusion: since 1977, differential classes for students with disabilities have been abolished (Ianes et al., 2020; Saloviita & Consegna, 2019) and the value of heterogeneity is affirmed as a resource to be designed so that it becomes an educational resource (Arcangeli et al., 2016; Seitz et al., 2023). Therefore, the special needs teacher is assigned not to the individual pupil but to the whole class (Anastasiou et al., 2015; Devecchi et al., 2012) precisely to emphasise that the action is not on the individual but on the context.

From a planning perspective, individualised educational plans (IEPs) are drawn up for pupils with disabilities, which must relate to class planning (Auer et al., 2023; Bellacicco & Cappello, 2023; Demo, 2022). For pupils with other special educational needs, individualised education plans are drawn up to indicate strategies that are successful in ensuring learning, always in connection with the approaches used for the whole class (Demo, 2022; Ianes & Demo, 2021).

With respect to special needs teacher education, one becomes a special needs teacher after attending an annual qualifying course corresponding to 60 ECTS and consisting of theoretical teachings and workshops in the pedagogical, didactic and psychological areas and an internship (Amatori et al., 2020; Calvani et al., 2017; De Angelis, 2021). Recruitment differs for permanent and fixed-term recruitment (Magni, 2019; Magni & Bertagna, 2022). In the first case, an open competition must be passed. In the second case, there is a ranking list of specialised people to draw from; once it is exhausted, unspecialised teachers are hired and then people who apply voluntarily and come from other professional fields. Also to remedy this situation, there is a compulsory 25-hour course for unspecialised special needs teachers and curricular teachers in whose class there is a special needs teacher.

### **Aims and scope of the study**

This exploratory study, conducted between February and April 2023, focuses on the Italian school system and wants to analyse special teacher education and recruitment to see if they are non-traditional factors of inequality. It pursues the following aims:

- to know what the contractual and training profiles of special needs teachers employed in Italian schools are;
- to understand the effects of the presence of unspecialised special needs teachers in terms of their effects on inclusion quality;
- to investigate the perspective of teachers and managers on this issue.

### **Methodology and methods**

#### **Research questions**

In the light of the theoretical framework developed and the objective and aims made explicit above, this exploratory study aims to answer two research questions:

1. Can special teacher education and recruitment can be considered non-traditional factors in Italy and why?
2. What are the perspectives of teachers and parents on this issue?

#### **Methods and tools**

This study was conducted using a sequential explanatory mixed method. Firstly, we carried out a data analysis using the Ministry of Education and ISTAT databases related to the school year 2021/22: this related to the profile of Italian special needs teachers with reference to the possession of the qualification and the type of contract (fixed-term or permanent).

Secondly, we carried out an asynchronous online focus group (Abrams & Gaiser, 2016) conducted in two Facebook communities: we asked teachers and parents what their perspective was on the phenomenon of unspecialised teachers.

#### **Participants**

The qualitative part of the study was carried out in two communities within the social network Facebook. The first community consisted of 71074 users, the second of 82993; people, who were informed of the use of their interventions for research purposes, were guaranteed anonymity.

<b>Parents of children with disabilities</b>	<b>Teachers</b>			
P1C1, P2C1, P1C2, P2C2, P5C2, P6C2, P7C2	<i>Curricular teachers</i> T2C1, T14C1, T9C2	<i>Specialized special needs teachers</i> T11C1, T15C1, T26C1, T36C1, T2C2, T6C2, T7C2, T8C2, T13C2	<i>Unspecialized special needs teachers but qualified to teach</i> T6C1, T7C1, T10C1	<i>Unspecialized and unqualified special needs teachers</i> T1C1, T4C1, T3C1, T13C1, T19C1, T31C1, T1C2, T5C2, T17C2

Figure 2. Participants in the asynchronous online focus group

39 people take part in the online focus group in the first community and 31 in the second one. In this analysis, we consider the most significant responses in terms of content and adherence to the subject of the question. With respect to the comments included, Figure 2

illustrates the profiles of the authors with reference to the category they belong to (parents or teachers); these data were deduced from the content of the comments or from short conversations conducted with users through the private messaging service made available by the social network.

The reactions to comments in response to the main post (like, love, hug, ahah, wow, sigh, grrr) considered here are 160 in the first community and 102 in the second. This is a non-probabilistic sample of volunteers: users spontaneously participated in the survey and belong to different age groups and territories. While this may appear to be a limitation since it does not represent a specific reality, the very exploratory nature of the study justifies the choice: the ultimate aim is to understand whether the criticalities highlighted in the literature are perceived as such by the school's protagonists, so approaching the subject by involving people of different ages, territories and experiences may prove useful for this purpose, despite the limitation relating to the small number of responses.

### ***Data analysis***

With respect to the qualitative part of the study, the users' responses, in the form of comments to the main post, were subjected to a content-informative analysis (Forbes Hallam, 2022; Stewart & Williams, 2005) that allowed the information obtained to be classified, synthesised and clarified. The web was understood here as a tool for collecting digital data, i.e., produced natively by users using the medium.

The reactions of community users to the comments written in response to the post, expressed through the emoticons provided by Facebook, were then analysed. This is in some way a relational analysis of the communication flow through which the focus group is articulated and is useful to understand how much the thoughts expressed are shared.

### **Results**

#### ***Special needs teacher in Italy: data by Ministry of Education and ISTAT***

Special teacher education and recruitment are two interconnected issues that have repercussions on students' pathways: not having an adequate number of specialised teachers means having to assign many substitutions to staff without specific qualifications and sometimes not even in possession of the qualification to teach on a common place or subject, with the impossibility of recruiting on a permanent basis despite the availability of teaching positions. These dynamics have distorting effects in terms of equity: not all pupils and classes can count on teachers adequately trained in inclusion and educational continuity becomes a chimera given the constant turnover.

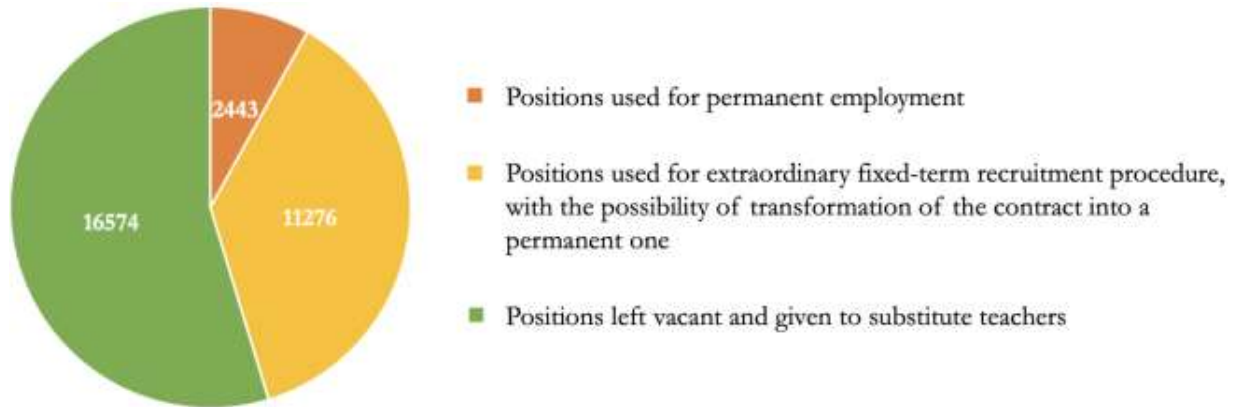


Figure 3. Special needs teachers hired on a fixed-term and permanent basis in the 2021/22 school year

Figure 3 shows how structural the shortage of special needs teachers is: compared to the total number of positions that were available for permanent recruitment, only 8,06% were used for tenure appointments under an ordinary procedure; 37,22% were given tenure under an extraordinary procedure: the specialized teachers included in the ranking list for fixed-term contracts who had obtained an annual employment as special needs teachers could have had a proposal for permanent recruitment to be finalised at the end of the school year after passing a test. 54,72% of the positions allocated to tenure were given as annual contracts (from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 31<sup>st</sup> August) to unspecialised staff or to specialised teachers who chose not to avail themselves of this possibility. Therefore, tenured special needs teachers are less than half. It depends both on special teacher education and recruitment and on the professional choices of individual teachers who sometimes opt for a common or subject position with a fixed-term or permanent contract, although they can be appointed to a tenure-track position as special needs teachers.

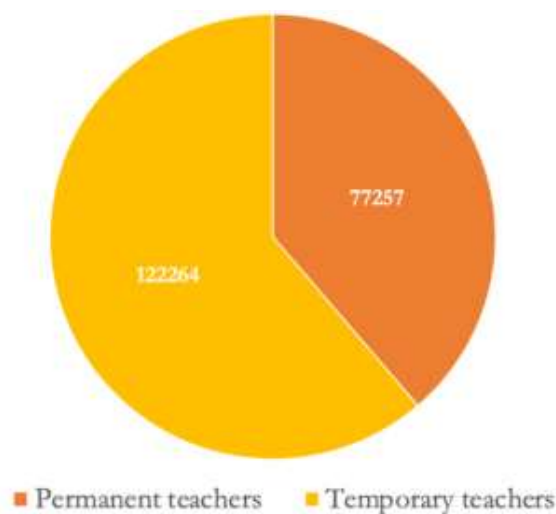


Figure 4. Teachers on support posts in the 2021/2022 school year between tenured teachers and teachers hired on fixed-term contracts

The structural shortage of special needs teachers is even more evident from Figure 4: out of the total need, 38,73% are hired on permanent contracts, 61,27% on fixed-term contracts. Of the non-tenured teachers, 84,84% are employed until 30<sup>th</sup> June of the school year considered, 15,16% until 31<sup>st</sup> August; of the positions on 31<sup>st</sup> August that remained vacant after the fixed-term recruitment procedures, 42,53% are for the recruitment of specialised special needs teacher, and 57,47% are occupied almost entirely by teachers without qualification.

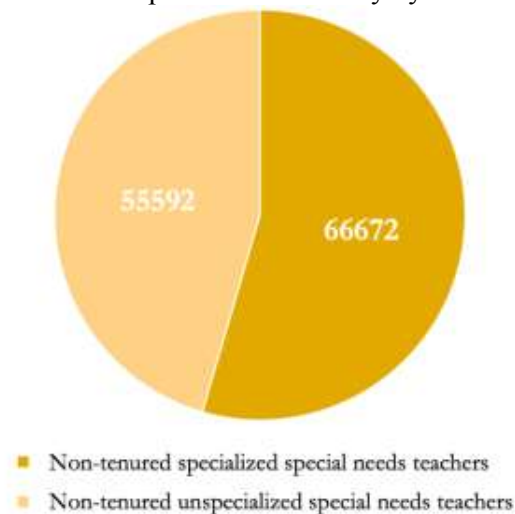


Figure 5. Possession of specialisation by non-tenured special needs teachers

In essence, most classes with a pupil with disabilities have a non-tenured special needs teacher; of these, almost 1 in 2 (45.46%) do not have the specialisation (Figure 5). Moreover, of the total number of tenured and non-tenured support teachers, 1 in 3 does not have the specialisation (Figure 6). The situation differs in different parts of Italy: while in the North and the Centre the employment of unspecialised personnel is equivalent to almost half of the total number of special needs teachers employed on both fixed-term and permanent basis, in the South it corresponds to only one fifth.

The profiles of unspecialised special needs teachers are different: one part is qualified to teach on curricular positions, another part consists of people who apply spontaneously. In the latter case, the profiles are the most diverse, from students not yet included in the official lists to people without specific (special) teacher education and belonging to other professional fields; however, there are no official data on the number of positions filled by spontaneous applicants. The data proposed with respect to fixed-term recruitments only consider contracts on 30<sup>th</sup> June and 31<sup>st</sup> August. Therefore, the presence of unspecialised staff is greater if we consider all the recruitments related to shorter substitutions of absent staff: a massive recourse to spontaneous applications is plausible. In the last three school years, the situation seems to have improved, with a slight decrease of unspecialised special needs teachers.

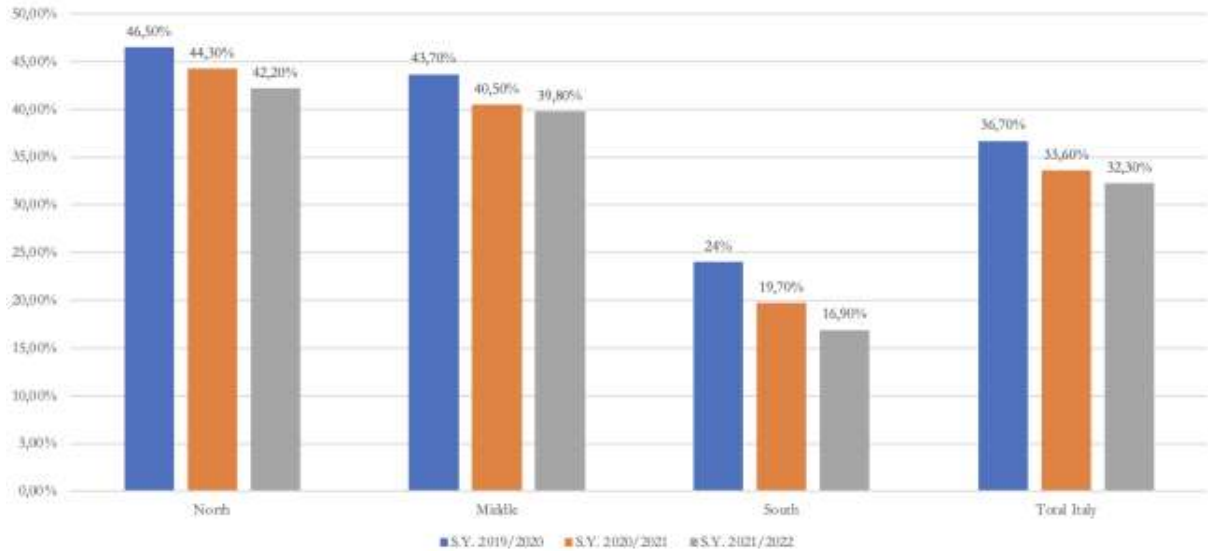


Figure 6. Possession of specialisation by non-tenured special needs teachers

Thus, judging by the numbers, special teacher education and recruitment can be considered non-traditional factors of inequality.

### *Asynchronous online focus group*

The answers of the users of the two communities touch upon different aspects of the professionalism of special needs teachers. Structural criticalities emerge on a macro-level, due to national education policies; there are also difficulties due to the school culture on the organisational level (meso-level) and classroom life (micro-level).

A significant number of answers focuses on the professional profile of special needs teachers: a sort of tension emerges between the idea that they can be agents of contextual change and the still widespread belief that they must be devoted to care activities. It is precisely for this reason that in many answers the value of special teacher education is somewhat diminished in favour of a certain vocation that substitute a professional habitus in which psycho-pedagogic-didactic skills find their place.

Empathy and disposition are natural gifts that are certainly not acquired by specialization; studies and teacher education are important... But sensitivity, understanding and listening are more so. Experience counts, not so much what you learn in books. Unspecialized teachers are welcome if they feel they have the calling (T1C1).

*15 likes, 4 loves*

Heart is essential in our work (T3C1).

*14 likes, 1 love*

I am an unqualified teacher. I could choose a curricular position, but I feel more inclined to be a special need teacher. Specialization is an extra title, experience in the field counts, and if I don't know something I ask for advice either from specialists or those who have more experience (T10C1).

*4 likes*

Many children need emotional and relational support. We don't just look at teacher education (T19C1)!

*5 grrr*

It is not teacher education course that gives birth to vocation (T1C2).

*7 like, 4 love, 3 hug*

There is no teacher education that holds! It all depends on relationships with the boy, with colleagues, and with management (T5C2).

*1 like*

You don't see a good teacher by certifications, including specialization. Teacher education is useful, but almost everything is done by the person and their being suited for the job (T17C2).

*5 likes, 1 love*

In both communities, a part of the teachers maintained that the professional profile of the special needs teacher is a combination of personal characteristics and vocational aspects and that specialisation is an accessory requirement. Except in one case, where the emoticons expressed opposition, in the others there was agreement with the opinions expressed. Actually, it should be remembered that education, even in adulthood, aims at the cultural and personal growth of the individual: even aspects mistakenly considered natural or gifted only by some, such as empathy, openness towards others, and the ability to establish a healthy and fruitful educational relationship, can be built up and improved thanks to (special) teacher education. These are fundamental competences that make the special needs teacher an agent of change who manage personal internal factors to act on complex and sometimes conflicting relational dynamics: it is necessary to get out of the "logic of the good heart" and "of vocation" so as not to diminish the value of these essential dimensions of the habitus of the special needs teacher and of all teachers.

Furthermore, specialising in inclusion means acquiring psycho-pedagogical and teaching skills that cannot be improvised. This issue is strongly emphasised by other teachers and parents, who stress the crucial nature of the professional dimension of teachers' work and the importance of not giving in to charitable or compensatory visions.

If there is a shortage of nurses and I gave an exam in school hygiene can I send a curriculum to the hospital below? Today anyone can teach: you disqualify the profession and harm the kids (P1C1).

*6 likes, 2 love*

Specialization makes all the difference! The specialized special needs teacher is not only a plus for the pupil with disabilities but for the whole class: he/she works on the classroom climate, the relationship, the environment, and everyone benefits. Without the proper special teacher education, it is impossible to surely be aware of all these variables; we just assist (T36C1).

*9 likes*

Specialised special needs teachers were able to experience themselves in a serious internship by translating skills learned from books into practice and put to the test through simulations in labs. It doesn't all end with the special teacher education, but it does give you a mindset that you are unlikely to have without that kind of education (T2C2).

*4 likes, 3 love, 1 hug*

Good will is not enough, you need competence and professionalism. Teacher education is indispensable (T6C2)!

*2 likes, 2 loves*

You cannot do without education! Instead, we have teachers catapulted overnight into support. Even with the best good will, they won't know where to put their hands. We are talking about doing special education, not baby-sitting (T7C2).

*2 likes*

Specialization is a necessary and priority qualification. When teachers are called from curriculum or sometimes even cross-graded often we see total inexperience and lack of educational tools to cope with complex situations (T8C2).

*8 likes*

As a parent, I note that the right to work of a neurotypical adult is more relevant than the right to study and inclusion of a child with disabilities (P1C2).

*8 likes, 1 sigh*

I don't understand the tolerance for incompetence. Is asking for someone who is capable in their own work too much to ask? Being disabled puts you in a position to be content with what passes for you and be thankful as well. Would the same people who are condescending to teachers without the slightest education be condescending as well if they were touched by a doctor without any surgical specialty when they are on the table, ready for surgery? How would they react to being told by the Ministry of Health that unfortunately there are not enough surgeons (P2C2)?

*9 likes*

If it is not accompanied by training, goodwill can be disastrous (P5C2)!

*1 like*

First-time people with no education have been employing as special needs teacher for years: a disaster on the skin of the most fragile (P9C2).

*5 likes, 2 loves*

There is disinterest on the issue, it seems that specialization is just a title... Actually, as a parent, I have seen the difference between educated staff and improvised staff (P6C2)!

*9 likes*

I have worked as a special needs teacher both without specialization and with: thanks to special teacher education I have become more aware and intentional in my actions, because I have increased not only knowledge, but also skills and competencies. [...] Beyond intentions (even the best ones) a good special needs teacher needs specialization (P13C2).

*4 likes*

In reply to those who claim that training does not guarantee high quality standards in terms of inclusion, it is reiterated that specialisation is not a fad but is essential to build a professional habitus that guarantees a quality educational experience for everyone. It is then emphasised that the training pathway favours work not only in the psycho-pedagogical and didactic sphere, but also on the level of emotional, social and relational skills, overcoming the "logic of good heart" and "of vocation" In addition to the agreement expressed through emoticons, several distorting effects in terms of equity due to the recruitment of unqualified teaching staff are given as examples: these are widespread dynamics in many schools that damage pupils' educational experience. In fact, a compensatory view of work for inclusion and the delegation mechanism must be overcome.

Empathy, heart are not enough: I have seen serious mistakes made in absolute good faith from trivial reinforcement of dysfunctional behavior to something else (T14C1).

*5 likes, 1 hug*

The first year of primary school they called as special needs teacher a girl who had yet to graduate and not even to become a teacher. She did more harm than good: my son was bored and began to have dysfunctional behavior (P2C1).

*4 sigh*

I have no special teacher education and regretted being employed as special needs teacher: they assigned me to a boy I can't handle. [...] For some students there is a need for teachers trained in difficult behaviors to deal with. For others, regular teachers are fine (P31C1).

*3 grrr*



Last year my son's special needs teacher (hired after a spontaneous application) was a disaster from start to finish. My son practically lost a year, now we are catching up (P7C2).

*3 likes, 3 hug*

The situation appears in all its criticality: users express support for the opinions expressed and sometimes mark their sentiment in a direction of anger at the unfairness of students' daily experience. However, for schools it is impossible to do otherwise: there are few specialised special needs teachers and a large number of teaching positions have to be filled. In recent years, this phenomenon has led many people to enter the teaching profession either thanks to the permanent qualifying value of a qualification obtained many years earlier, without having updated their education in the meantime, or by applying through spontaneous applications. Now, there does not seem to be a solution: the places advertised for specialisation courses are far fewer than the need for teachers, also because it is essential that the number of eligible candidates is calibrated on the actual sustainability of the universities, so as not to reduce the quality of the education proposal.

Faced with the shortage of specialized teachers, welcome the presence of unspecialized ones. I have had both negative and positive experiences with them... I always recommend specializing: unfortunately, people often give up because they think that once you reach a certain age you can no longer study or because of the cost and commitment the course requires (T2C1).

*20 likes*

Specialists are also few because of the way special teacher education is organized (T4C1).

*8 likes*

Without unspecialized and teachers hired by resume, pupils would be without teachers. [...] So, now, non-specialized teachers guarantee, some better and some worse, an essential service (T6C1).

*4 likes*

I am specializing. [...] Empathy is important, but heart is not enough... It takes expertise! We can make a difference for these kids, but we need to be trained (T7C1).

*14 likes, 1 love*

At the root is a dysfunctional system. Anyone who wants to go into the profession of mentor should be fully educated (T11C1).

*13 likes*

The problem is the system. How can you blame a temp who tries to bring home bread because they can't find anything better? Dignity to the role of the teacher must come first and foremost from the institution, with adequate contracts and reducing precariousness (T13C1).

*3 likes*

At my school, without unspecialised teachers, I would be the only special needs teacher. The error is in the system (T5C1).

*15 likes*

When the dry weather is blowing, even the storm is good. Special teacher education is selective and almost exclusive... But it is essential! This job is not assistance. Recruitment is also the problem: offering a precarious job is bound to go downhill. Teaching is often a job for those who cannot find better (T26C1).

*7 love, 2 like*

The extensive use of unspecialised teachers is considered a necessary evil due to the structural deficiencies of our school system. Teachers with the specific specialisation are few and even fewer are hired on a permanent basis; among them, many make a tenure transition

every year to curricular positions. The reactions to the comments express agreement with the thoughts expressed. Schools can only limit the damage by calling spontaneous applicants who have qualifications similar to those required.

In general, compared to those who took part in the exploratory survey, parents of pupils with disabilities and specialised special needs teachers recognise the value of the special teacher education to acquire psycho-pedagogical-didactic skills and work on emotional, social and relational aspects, not giving in to the common sense according to which the “good heart” and the “vocation” are sufficient elements to build an effective inclusion and stressing the need to go beyond delegation mechanisms and compensatory visions. The unspecialised special needs teachers on the one hand emphasise the personal characteristics relating to the emotional-relational sphere as the main element of the professional habitus, on the other hand they highlight the difficulties in accessing specialisation courses due to the few places advertised, their cost and the commitment required. The curricular teachers express opinions sometimes adhering to the specialised teachers and parents, sometimes to the unspecialised.

### **Discussion**

This study confirms the critical issues that have emerged in the literature. Special teacher education and recruitment represent a non-traditional factor of inequality in Italy (Ferrero, 2023c). They originate at a macro-level. At the meso-level, they put schools in a difficult position to manage professional resources and guarantee inclusion quality. They also have effects at the micro-level, producing inequalities in students’ school experience.

The shortage of specialised teachers leads to recruitment problems, with few permanent hires (Boe & Cook, 2006; Brownell & Sindelar, 2016). Many permanent teachers recruited as specialised teachers switch to curricular teaching after the five-year constraint in Italy, further reducing the pool of special needs teachers. This situation leads to compensatory dynamics and delegation mechanisms, disregarding the inclusion project (Cooc, 2019; De Angelis, 2021).

As we have seen, this issue does not only concern Italy but many school systems internationally. Therefore, it is an international challenge that requires serious reflection starting from the convergences emerging between school systems (Boe, 2014): we need to rethink recruitment policies to make them more effective and responsive to the needs of everyday school life and make special teacher education more accessible. Moreover, it would be necessary to think about special teacher education not only for special needs teachers, but for all teachers: in this way, it would be possible to have professionals with both curricular and special needs teachers’ tasks, avoiding delegation mechanisms and allowing everyone to acquire those competences to act on contexts and not on individuals, creating capacitating experiences and settings.

Definitively, the Italian case can be useful for reflections even beyond the boundaries of the school system under investigation. In fact, it emerges that the shortage of specialised support teachers produces distorting effects in terms of equity by worsening students' school experience. Having inadequately educated teachers does not allow for the paradigm shift that inclusion would require: it acts on the individual and not on the contexts, focusing more on capabilities that there are and should be developed.

Furthermore, the asynchronous online focus group shows us the phenomenon of “epistemic bubbles” (Ferrari & Moruzzi, 2020; Nguyen, 2020), i.e., the tendency to confirm positions in which one recognises oneself also thanks to the algorithms that regulate social

networks and propose content in line with what the user has shown interest in or assent to. With respect to the issue under investigation, it is interesting to note how the tendency to devalue special teacher education emerges: in the face of a minority who recognise its value and importance, many give in to a “good-hearted logic” that risks leading to welfare dynamics that have nothing to do with the vision of inclusion as a process.

### **Conclusion**

Within the reflection on the role of schools for social justice and equity, it is imperative to focus on inclusion. As they have been conceived up to now, special teacher education and recruitment are non-traditional factors of inequality (in Italy but not only), since they are dynamics originating from the organisation of our school system that create inequalities in pupils’ educational paths.

The numbers of the phenomenon and the perspectives of the school’s protagonists leave no escape: action must be taken so that what should be the exception (having some unspecialised teachers as special needs teacher) stops being the rule. It is a work that involves political actors, universities and school systems: it is crucial to promote the idea of the special needs teacher as an agent of change who acts on the contexts to improve the educational experience of all pupils.

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