

Innovative Pedagogical Approaches and Inclusive Teaching Practices in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories in the specialization pathways for support teachers, highlighting their contribution to the development of professional competencies and inclusive teaching practices. Within the framework established by Articles 6 and 7 of Decree-Law No. 71/2024, the study examines how laboratory-based training can integrate previous teaching experience with pedagogical knowledge, critical reflection, and collaborative learning. Drawing on theoretical perspectives related to experiential learning, reflective practice, and sociocultural approaches, the paper conceptualizes laboratories as educational environments in which theoretical knowledge and professional experience interact to support the construction of teaching professionalism. Particular attention is devoted to the integration of pedagogical, didactic, communicative, relational, and motor dimensions, emphasizing their relevance for addressing diverse educational needs and promoting meaningful participation. The discussion also considers the importance of empathy, professional self-efficacy, and collaborative practices in fostering inclusive educational environments. Through a theoretical and pedagogical analysis, the paper argues that laboratory-based methodologies represent more than practical training opportunities, providing essential contexts for developing reflective, flexible, and context-sensitive professional competencies. Ultimately, Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories emerge as valuable instruments for strengthening teacher education and promoting an inclusive teaching professionalism capable of responding to the complexity of contemporary educational settings.

Key words: *Inclusive Education; Teacher Education; Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories; Support Teachers; Reflective Practice; Professional Development.*

Introduction

The training of Specialized Teachers for support activities is now at the center of a Pedagogical reflection that invests not only the processes of school inclusion, but more generally the very meaning of teaching professionalism in contemporary schools (Mura, 2019). The profound social, cultural and educational transformations that characterize our time have progressively changed the face of educational institutions, making it increasingly evident the insufficiency of professional models based exclusively on the possession of disciplinary knowledge or on the application of consolidated teaching procedures. The growing heterogeneity of classes, the plurality of educational needs and the complexity of the dynamics that cross school contexts require, in fact, professional figures capable of interpreting changing situations, of developing pedagogically based responses and of building learning environments

in which each student can find concrete opportunities for participation and development (Sasson et al., 2022).

In this scenario, inclusion takes on the value of an interpretative category through which to reread the meaning of education and school. It does not coincide with the adoption of specific organizational measures nor can it be reduced to a set of interventions aimed at pupils with disabilities or other forms of fragility. Rather, inclusion refers to a conception of the educational experience based on the recognition of diversity as a constitutive dimension of the human and on the responsibility of the school to create the conditions for this plurality to translate into effective opportunities for learning, relationships and participation (Mura et al., 2023). The result is a vision of the school community in which the quality of educational processes is not measured exclusively on the basis of the results achieved, but also through the ability to guarantee conditions of equity, belonging and enhancement of differences.

Such a perspective inevitably implies a redefinition of teaching professionalism. Teachers are increasingly called upon to work in contexts characterized by high educational and organizational complexity, in which the dimension of teaching is intertwined with that of planning, pedagogical mediation, professional collaboration and the construction of meaningful relationships. In this context, training assumes a strategic function not only because it allows the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, but because it contributes to the construction of ways of reading the educational reality capable of consciously directing professional action.

The figure of the Specialized Support Teacher represents one of the most significant expressions of this transformation. Its function develops well beyond the dimension of individual intervention aimed at the student with disabilities, placing itself within a broader pedagogical responsibility that involves the entire school community. The specialized teacher is called upon to act as a mediator between different educational perspectives, a promoter of collaborative processes and a privileged interlocutor in the construction of paths oriented towards the participation and educational success of students. The specificity of this role requires a professionalism capable of integrating pedagogical, didactic, relational and organizational skills, overcoming any reductive interpretation that identifies support with a set of specialized techniques or procedures (Qvortrup, & Qvortrup, 2018).

It is within this framework that the theme of the Pedagogical-Didactic Workshops envisaged in the Specialization Courses for the Didactic Support of Pupils with Disabilities is placed. The growing attention paid to these training devices reflects a conception of vocational training that recognizes the situated, relational and problematic character of educational action. Teaching professionalism is not built, in fact, through the simple transmission of knowledge, but through processes of critical elaboration, comparison with experience and progressive construction of professional meanings. The Laboratories therefore assume a function that goes beyond the methodological dimension, configuring themselves as places in which pedagogical knowledge, educational practice and professional reflection enter into dialogue, contributing to the construction of a teaching identity aware of the complexity that characterizes contemporary school contexts (Margiotta, 2017).

Starting from these premises, this Chapter intends to deepen the role of the Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories in the Specialization Paths for Support, analyzing their pedagogical matrices, training purposes and contribution to the construction of teaching professionalism. The hypothesis that guides the reflection is that the centrality attributed to the laboratory dimension does not respond exclusively to methodological or organizational needs, but expresses a precise conception of training, based on the conviction that the quality of educational action depends on the ability of school professionals to develop interpretative, planning and cultural tools appropriate to the complexity of the challenges posed by contemporary education.

1. The Regulatory Framework of Specialization Paths for Support: between recognition of professional experience and qualification of skills

The establishment of the Specialization Paths for the Educational Support of Pupils with Disabilities provided for by Articles 6 and 7 of Decree-Law No. 71 of 2024, converted with amendments by Law No. 106 of 2024, is part of a phase of significant transformation of teacher training policies. The regulatory provisions introduce, in fact, a specific response to an issue that in recent years has taken on particular importance in the Italian school system, namely the presence of a large number of teachers who, despite having gained substantial professional experience in the field of support, are devoid of the relevant specialization.

The legislative intervention is characterized by the attempt to combine two complementary needs. On the one hand, to ensure an expansion of opportunities for access to specialization, responding to the needs of the school system and the growing demand for qualified teachers in the field of inclusion; on the other hand, to enhance the wealth of skills built through the professional experience gained in educational contexts. This approach appears particularly significant because it recognizes that the activity carried out in schools is not only an administrative requirement or a criterion for access to training courses, but represents a substantial element of the process of building teaching professionalism (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Articles 6 and 7 introduce, albeit in different ways, a training model that attributes a central role to the experience already acquired by teachers. This is an orientation that marks a partial discontinuity with traditional approaches to initial training, often characterized by a clear distinction between the moment of formal learning and that of professional practice. In the new paths, on the contrary, the experience gained in the field is not considered an external element with respect to training, but a resource to be recognized, valued and critically reworked within the specialization path.

Particularly relevant, from this point of view, is the recognition of the service provided as a qualifying element of access and of the structure of the paths themselves. The regulatory choice seems to be based on the assumption that the professional activity carried out in school contexts has allowed teachers to deal with educational, organizational and relational problems that constitute an essential component of future specialized professionalism. Experience, therefore, is not interpreted as a mere sum of years of service, but as a professional heritage to be integrated with more structured pedagogical, methodological and didactic skills.

In this perspective, the paths envisaged by Articles 6 and 7 are part of a broader trend that affects contemporary vocational training systems, oriented towards recognizing the value of skills acquired in work contexts and promoting training models capable of integrating formal learning and professional experience. The focus is not exclusively on the acquisition of new content, but on the qualification and systematization of skills already partially developed through educational practice.

The structure of the courses reflects this approach. The articulation of the training activities highlights the desire to overcome an exclusively transmissive conception of training, favoring devices capable of favoring the comparison with concrete professional situations and the re-elaboration of the experiences gained in school contexts. In this context, the Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories, which occupy a central position in the training architecture outlined by the legislation, take on particular importance.

The choice to attribute such a significant role to the Laboratories appears consistent with the very nature of the recipients of the courses. The participants are not configured as subjects without professional experience, but as teachers who have already worked within the schools and who need to consolidate, deepen and critically reorganize their wealth of knowledge and skills. The Laboratories become, therefore, the place where professional experience can be reinterpreted in the light of broader pedagogical and methodological references, favoring the construction of a more aware and structured professionalism.

The structure outlined by Articles 6 and 7 therefore highlights a conception of training that recognizes the value of experience without reducing specialization to a mere certification of the service performed. On the contrary, professional experience is taken as the starting point of a path aimed at its critical re-elaboration and integration within a more articulated framework of skills. In this perspective, specialization does not only represent the completion of a training process, but the consolidation of a professional identity capable of combining pedagogical knowledge, teaching skills and educational awareness, indispensable elements for operating effectively in inclusive school contexts.

2. The laboratory methodology and the construction of teaching professionalism

The centrality of the laboratory methodology within the Specialization Pathways for Support cannot be interpreted exclusively as an organizational or methodological choice. It refers to a precise conception of vocational training, based on the idea that the skills necessary to operate in inclusive educational contexts are not the result of a simple acquisition of theoretical knowledge, but are developed through complex processes of experience processing, critical reflection and shared construction of professional knowledge. In this perspective, the Laboratory assumes the function of a training device capable of facilitating the transition from formal knowledge to professional knowledge, promoting forms of learning in which theory and practice feed each other within a continuous process of interpretation and re-elaboration (Guerini, 2023).

The pedagogical framework that supports laboratory training finds its roots in a theoretical tradition which, although developed through different contributions, converges in the recognition of experience as a generative element of professional learning. Starting from the reflections of Dewey (1922), experience is not conceived as a simple succession of events or practices, but as an opportunity for the construction of meanings. What gives educational value to experience is not, in fact, its occurrence, but the possibility of subjecting it to a process of analysis and reflection that allows us to understand its implications and to guide future actions. Laboratory training is precisely in this perspective, since it creates the conditions for the future specialized teacher to critically question educational situations, transforming professional experience into an opportunity for learning and growth.

This vision finds further development in the elaborations of Kolb (2013), who interprets learning as a cyclical process in which concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization and experimentation are closely interconnected. The interest of this perspective for the training of Specialized Teachers lies in the possibility of overcoming the traditional dichotomy between theoretical and practical knowledge. Professional competence does not emerge from the mechanical application of abstract principles, nor from the simple repetition of experience, but from the ability to build meaningful connections between the theoretical frameworks of reference and the concrete situations that characterize the educational action. In this dynamic, the Laboratory is configured as a space in which the future Specialized Teacher is called upon to critically interpret the practice, to compare different hypotheses of intervention and to develop an increasingly articulated understanding of inclusive processes.

The importance attributed to reflection on experience inevitably leads to the concept of professional reflexivity, which represents one of the most significant theoretical nuclei of contemporary teacher training. Schön's (2006) reflections have contributed to redefining the figure of the professional as a subject capable of producing knowledge starting from the analysis of problematic situations encountered in practice. Educational activity takes place, in fact, within contexts characterized by high complexity, in which the variety of situations, the unpredictability of relational dynamics and the plurality of educational needs make the use of standardized procedures insufficient. In this scenario, professional competence is manifested

in the ability to interpret problems, formulate hypotheses of intervention, monitor their effects and continuously redefine one's operational strategies. The laboratory methodology offers a privileged context for the exercise of this reflexivity, since it allows educational practices to be subjected to systematic processes of observation, problematization and critical re-elaboration. The analysis of cases, the discussion of complex situations, the shared planning and the comparison between different professional experiences favor the development of a reflective posture oriented not only to the solution of problems, but also to the understanding of the pedagogical assumptions that guide educational action. Through these processes, the future Specialized Teacher progressively acquires the ability to read the complexity of school contexts and to make decisions based on pedagogically aware criteria.

The construction of teaching professionalism cannot, however, be traced back exclusively to an individual dimension. Professional skills are developed within relational contexts in which comparison, collaboration and sharing of practices play a decisive role. In this direction, the socio-cultural perspective developed by Vygotskij (2006) offers a particularly significant interpretative key. Learning is conceived as a socially mediated process, in which the construction of knowledge takes place through interaction with others and participation in shared practices. This approach is particularly consistent with the very nature of school inclusion, which requires the ability to operate within collaborative networks and to build educational responses through processes of co-responsibility.

From this point of view, the Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories constitute contexts in which professional knowledge takes on a dialogical and collective dimension. The comparison of different experiences, the critical discussion of common problems and collaborative planning favor the construction of shared meanings and allow participants to progressively expand their interpretative schemes. Professional learning is thus configured as a process of co-construction of knowledge, in which the contribution of individuals is intertwined with that of the group, generating new possibilities for understanding and intervention (Ainscow, & Booth, 2019).

This dynamic recalls the concept of community of practice, according to which professional learning is achieved through active participation in contexts characterized by the sharing of common experiences, languages and objectives. Laboratory training contributes to the construction of these communities, offering future Specialized Teachers opportunities for structured discussion and collective reflection on the problems of inclusion. This is particularly important in the field of support, where the quality of educational interventions depends to a large extent on the ability to establish collaborative relationships with curriculum teachers, families, local services and other professionals involved in inclusion processes.

In the light of these considerations, the laboratory methodology can be interpreted as an authentic device of professional development, capable of promoting skills that transcend the simple acquisition of operational techniques. Through the integration of experience, reflexivity and collaborative learning, the Laboratory promotes the construction of design, relational, organizational and evaluation skills that are essential to deal with the complexity of contemporary school contexts. Its function does not consist in the transmission of pre-established models of intervention, but in the promotion of a professionalism capable of critically questioning the educational reality, interpreting its transformations and building flexible, contextualized and pedagogically based responses. In this perspective, the Laboratory represents a space for professional elaboration in which it is possible to progressively develop the skills necessary to promote authentic, sustainable inclusive processes consistent with the complexity of contemporary schooling.

3. Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories and the integration of professional knowledge

The architecture of the Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories envisaged in the Specialization Paths for Support offers a particularly significant key to understanding the conception of teaching professionalism that underlies the entire training system. Their articulation does not, in fact, appear to be organized around the different types of disabilities, nor exclusively oriented towards the acquisition of specialized techniques or procedures. On the contrary, it reflects a vision of training based on the progressive integration of multiple and complementary knowledge, recognizing the intrinsically complex nature of educational action and the plurality of skills required of those who work in contemporary school contexts.

The professionalism of the Specialized Teacher is configured, in this perspective, as a professionalism of synthesis, called to relate cultural, pedagogical, didactic, communicative, relational and expressive dimensions that cannot be considered separately. School inclusion, in fact, is not limited to the knowledge of the characteristics of the different conditions of disability, but requires the ability to interpret the educational processes in their entirety, grasping the many variables that intervene in the construction of learning and participation opportunities. The structure of the laboratories seems to respond precisely to this need, proposing a training course that crosses different areas of educational knowledge and that restores the complexity of the teaching function in its entirety.

Particularly significant, in this sense, is the presence of Laboratories dedicated to the Didactics of the Anthropological Area and the Didactics of Education. These areas recall a conception of teaching that cannot be limited to the transmission of disciplinary content, but which is rooted in the formation of the person, in the construction of identity and in the development of citizenship. The attention to the cultural, value and ethical dimensions of education highlights how the professionalism of the specialized teacher requires a constant ability to question the formative meaning of school practices and the contribution they can offer to the processes of individual and social growth of students (Chiappetta, 2024).

Alongside this dimension, the Workshops dedicated to Sensory Disabilities and Communicative Codes of Language Education focus on the theme of accessibility and educational mediation. They highlight how participation in learning processes is closely linked to the possibility of accessing the languages through which knowledge is constructed and shared. Communication thus takes on a value that transcends its instrumental function, becoming an essential condition for the exercise of the right to education and for the construction of meaningful relationships within the school community. In this perspective, the Specialized Teacher is called upon to develop a particular sensitivity towards the multiple forms through which students understand, express and negotiate meanings.

A similar reflection can be developed in relation to the Laboratories dedicated to the Codes of Logical and Mathematical Language. Their presence within the training course highlights how the issue of inclusion cannot be separated from the disciplinary dimension of teaching. Access to knowledge represents, in fact, one of the fundamental conditions for participation in school life and for the full exercise of the right to learning. Hence the need for a professionalism capable of questioning not only what is taught, but also the ways in which disciplinary contents are organized, mediated and made accessible to the plurality of students present in the classes (Bossart et al., 2013).

Of particular importance are also the Workshops dedicated to Psycho-Educational and Didactic Interventions for Pupils with Behavioural and Relational Disorders. These areas recall the need to recognise the affective and relational dimension as a constitutive component of the educational experience. Learning cannot be interpreted exclusively as a cognitive process, as it develops within relational contexts that profoundly influence motivation, a sense of belonging and participation in school life. The ability to understand and manage relational dynamics represents, therefore, an essential skill for the Specialised Teacher, who is called

upon to operate in situations in which the construction of favourable conditions for learning inevitably passes through the quality of educational relationships. No less significant is the presence of Laboratories dedicated to Non-Verbal Communicative Languages and Techniques and Motor Activities. These areas contribute to broadening the traditional conception of teaching, recognizing the educational value of the body, expressiveness, movement and forms of communication that transcend verbal language. In a pedagogical perspective attentive to the entirety of the person, the body does not represent a simple support for learning, but a fundamental dimension through which individuals know the world, build relationships and attribute meaning to their experiences. The enhancement of non-verbal languages and motor activities highlights a conception of education oriented towards the plurality of forms of expression and the promotion of opportunities for participation that recognize the diversity of ways of learning and communicating (Ainscow, & Messiou, 2018).

From a psychological perspective, inclusion also involves processes that shape how teachers and students interpret and respond to one another. Empathy may support teachers' motivation and perceived efficacy in inclusive education: a questionnaire study involving 480 Chinese pre-service teachers found positive associations among these variables and attitudes toward inclusion, with teaching motivation and inclusive-education efficacy statistically mediating the relation between empathy and attitudes. As the study is cross-sectional and context-specific, it does not establish causality; it nevertheless identifies psychological dimensions that can be addressed in teacher education. Classroom practice offers a complementary example. In an Italian peer-tutored inclusive physical education programme involving 132 middle-school students, 54 students participated as tutors in weekly sessions over four months; compared with students in a control group, participants reported higher empathic concern and perspective taking after the programme (Gobbi et al., 2016). The findings should be interpreted in light of the short conference-abstract format and the absence of long-term follow-up. They nonetheless illustrate how structured shared activities can create opportunities for perspective taking and peer relationships, connecting the workshop areas discussed above with the emotional and relational dimensions of inclusion. Pedagogical-Didactic Laboratories can build on this connection by inviting future teachers to analyse classroom cases and collaboratively design activities that engage motivation, self-efficacy, empathy and peer interaction.

Considered as a whole, the articulation of the Laboratories gives the image of a professionalism that cannot be defined through a single specialized competence. The figure of the Specialized Teacher emerges, rather, as that of a professional called to operate in a space of intersection between different knowledge and different dimensions of the educational experience. The function of the Laboratories consists precisely in promoting this integration, offering opportunities for in-depth study that make it possible to overcome disciplinary fragmentation and sectoral visions of educational intervention. The result is a conception of training oriented not to the simple acquisition of specialized knowledge, but to the construction of a professional gaze capable of reading the complexity of educational processes through multiple interpretative perspectives and of translating this understanding into practices consistent with the educational purposes of the contemporary school.

Conclusion

The reflections developed in this Chapter allow us to recognize the laboratory dimension as one of the most significant places through which the training of Specialized Teachers is called to deal with the transformations that affect contemporary schools. In an educational context characterized by increasing complexity, the pluralization of training needs and the progressive redefinition of the functions attributed to the school institution, teaching professionalism can no longer be interpreted as the simple possession of disciplinary

knowledge or sectoral technical skills. Rather, it requires the ability to integrate different perspectives, to inhabit the uncertainty that characterizes educational action and to make decisions based on a critical understanding of situations. In this perspective, the Laboratory is configured as a training space in which pedagogical knowledge ceases to be abstract knowledge to become a tool for interpreting educational reality. Its value does not lie exclusively in the possibility of bringing the future Specialized Teacher closer to professional practice, but in the ability to promote forms of thought that allow to read complexity, problematize experiences and attribute meaning to educational processes. The centrality attributed to the Laboratories in the Specialization Paths appears, therefore, to be an expression of a conception of training that recognizes the situated, relational and reflective character of teaching professionalism. The challenge that lies ahead for the future does not only concern the consolidation of these training devices, but the ability to preserve their most authentic function. In a season in which training sometimes risks being reduced to performance logics or models oriented mainly towards the acquisition of immediately expendable skills, pedagogical-didactic laboratories can continue to represent privileged places of cultural and professional elaboration. Their relevance lies, in the final analysis, in the possibility of contributing to the training of teachers capable not only of operating effectively in school contexts, but of critically questioning the educational significance of their actions and the role that the school is called to play within contemporary societies.

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