FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND FACULTY TRAINING IN UDL. INCLUSIVE TEACHER AGENCY IN THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT E FACULTY TRAINING IN UDL. INCLUSIVE TEACHER AGENCY NELLA FORMAZIONE PROFESSIONALE DEI DOCENTI UNIVERSITARI

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ABSTRACT
The literature on Faculty Development has given rise to training initiatives on the professional skills of university teachers. *Teacher Agency*, recognized as the ability to act and be the protagonist of one's own action as an *agent of change*, represents the teacher's attitude to produce innovation. The contribution, from a *UDL* perspective, argues on *Inclusive Teacher Agency* as a transformative logic in professional development and co-construction of an inclusive academic context.

La letteratura sul Faculty Development ha dato vita a iniziative formative sulle competenze professionali dei docenti universitari. La *Teacher Agency*, riconosciuta come la capacità di agire ed essere protagonista del proprio agire come *agente di cambiamento*, rappresenta l'attitudine del docente a produrre innovazione. Il contributo, in ottica *UDL*, argomenta sull'*Inclusive Teacher Agency* come logica trasformativa nello sviluppo professionale e co-costruzione di un contesto accademico inclusivo.

KEYWORDS
Faculty Development; Faculty Training in UDL; Inclusive Teacher Agency, Transformative Learning, Professional Development.
Faculty Development; Faculty Training in UDL; Inclusive Teacher Agency, Apprendimento trasformativo, sviluppo professionale

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Introduction

Research in Higher Education has shown that the professional competences of the university lecturer in addition to the theoretical-disciplinary ones also include planning, evaluative, communicative and social, didactic-organisational competences functional to the educational success and development of students' competences. Faculty Development pathways play a relevant role in the promotion of *on-the-job* learning, which is crucial for supporting and promoting career paths, the professional development of university lecturers (Hassan, et al., 2021; Lee, et al., 2018), the professional identity of lecturers, a culture of change and the development of the institution (Emanuel, 2022).

Based on the assumption that student diversity is the norm rather than the exception *Universal Design for Learning* (*UDL*) is a framework aimed at improving teaching and learning for all and aims to create flexible and accessible curricula from the outset using scientific knowledge about learning mechanisms and differences (Hromalik, et al. 2024).

Despite the global recognition of *UDL* and the potential benefits of the involvement and participation of all students and the professionalism of teachers from an inclusive perspective, especially in academia the literature on its applications is still limited.

The autonomy and active engagement of teachers in implementing inclusive education is related to their capacity for *agency* and their being *agents of change*. *Agency* is recognised as the ability of the teacher to act and be the protagonist of his/her own educational action as an *agent of change*. *Teacher Agency* (*TA*) represents the teacher's ability to produce innovation in educational contexts and, in an active and transformative way, to actively act in educational practices. *TA* refers to the teacher's competence in planning and implementing educational change, directing and regulating their actions in educational contexts. By determining how teachers develop their professional decision-making process *TA* also becomes vital for teacher education and school improvement.

The *Inclusive Teacher Agency* (*Inclusive TA*) is a theoretical model based on the *agentivity* of teachers that assumes inclusion and social justice as the ultimate goals of educational action (Pantić, 2015) in order to guarantee the right to education and educational success for all in an equitable and accessible manner.

The evolution of university teaching towards inclusive didactics represents one of the most evident problematic nodes in the development of inclusion processes in

universities, which calls for a reflection on what strategies to implement in order to involve, above all, university teachers in the understanding of inclusion issues, both as factors for the promotion and development of university contexts that are innovative and open to diversity (de Anna, Covelli, 2018).

Italian research arrives at the *Inclusive Teacher Agency* relatively late compared to other states, despite having historically thought about inclusion since the 1970s, before other countries (Corsi, 2024).

From a *UDL* perspective, how does the *Inclusive Teacher Ageny* facilitate the inclusion process?

From a *UDL* perspective and based on the logic of *inclusive school agency* in which the concept of variability and perturbability constitute a structural (and not exceptional) element of educational contexts, we will explore a pedagogical reading of *agency* as an individual characteristic of the teacher by hypothesising that *inclusive TA* as a transformative logic, as a link, can provide a functional contribution to the continuing education (individual and, in communities of practice, collegial) and professional development of university teachers as co-constructive agents of inclusive academic contexts.

Within this framework storytelling, as an innovative approach in inclusive education, is identified as an individual and collegial training device in the perspective of *communities of practice*, giving rise to a *reflective community* that fosters on-the-job learning, professional development, institutional organisation and educational research to build change for an inclusive university and, in a broader perspective, social change.

1. Faculty Development and Universal Design for Learning

Inclusive education has emerged as an essential component in creating just, equitable and accessible education systems for all students, without exception (UNESCO, 2021).

Universities are responsible for the education of all students and it is essential to integrate *UDL* into the curriculum for proactive inclusive design to meet their diverse needs (Sanger, Gleason, 2020; Rao et al., 2014; Dalton et al., 2017). Inclusion drives transformative changes that promote learning and participation, acting as an antidote to exclusionary practices (Liasidou, Liasidou, 2023), reducing

the demand for accessibility services (Houghton, Fovet, 2013), *drop-out* rates and the number of students taking extra time to complete courses.

The objective of the *UDL* curriculum goes beyond investing in improving teaching skills and diversifying educational methods to make the acquisition of specific knowledge or skills accessible and equitable, but aims to train expert students and teachers.

Teacher professional development, together with teaching and organizational development, is one of the three key areas of contextualization of formal and informal practices (Lewis, 1996; De Rossi, Fedeli, 2022) and which form the basis for the implementation of academic policies.

However, there are few training courses specifically aimed at professionals that invest in *UDL* in universities. Most of the studies analyzed show that university training courses typically include only a small component of UDL within broader inclusive teaching programs (Dell'Anna, et al., 2024).

2. From *Teacher Agency* to *Inclusive Teacher Agency*: Framework and Definitions

Human *agency* has been defined as the capacity to "intervene in the world", to "act differently", to "make a difference", to exercise "a kind of personal power", it refers to a continuous and/or temporal process of development of individual practices and actions (Giddens, 1984) and it is the dynamic competence of individuals to act independently on their own actions and decisions (Barker, 2005). In the ecological perspective, *agency* is achieved (rather than possessed) through the active involvement of individuals in contexts as it is located within the contingencies of contexts in which agents act on the basis of their own beliefs, values and attributes that they mobilize in relation to a particular situation. The ecological action of *agency* is dynamic in that it involves the interaction of temporal dimensions, informed by the past (previous experiences, for example, adopted routines), oriented to the future (motivations, fears, desires) and engaged in the present (judgments on the limits and opportunities offered by contexts (Biesta, Tedder, 2007), of personal and contextual factors.

Being an agent means having intention, motivation and perseverance in performing quality actions, being able to cope with obstacles guided by a sense of purpose and commitment to the desired outcome (Bandura, 2001) and having the knowledge and competence to achieve the desired outcome (Giddens, 1984).

Agents are capable of transforming the contexts in which they are inserted (Eteläpelto, et al. 2013) as *agency* is further determined by levels of autonomy and power, within certain structures and cultures, and by reflexivity which implies the ability to monitor and reflect on both one's own practices and contexts social, to creatively imagine alternatives and to collaborate with others to bring about their transformation (Archer, 2000). *TA* refers to the ability of teachers to act in educational contexts in a purposeful and constructive way to direct their own professional growth and contribute to the growth of the quality of education and the institution, it is exercised when teachers make choices that influence their professional position and varies according to the social structure, including certain environmental conditions of possibilities and constraints, beliefs, values and skills that teachers put in place in response to particular situations (Priestley, et al., 2012).

From these assumptions, *TA* is something that the person does, it is not a personal quality (Biesta, Tedder, 2006), it is something that emerges or is realized through the engagement of teachers with the environment, rather than being possessed by individuals (Eteläpelto, et al., 2013) as it derives from the interaction between *agentic* capacity (individual factors, e.g. commitment, value, role, belief, power) and *agentic* spaces (contextual factors, e.g. social change, role expectations, social network (Biesta, et al., 2015).

Teachers as *agents of change* oriented to school improvement act to form and reform an effective educational relationship (productive collaborations with colleagues, families and communities and to engage in investigations aimed at addressing exclusion and educational disadvantage), in the development of the curriculum (exploiting multiple resources) in teaching and learning in the classroom (organizing collaborative discussions to motivate students (Sang, 2020).

Policy implementation and reform innovation in educational settings rely on individual and collective *TA* of teachers (Sang, 2020).

Individual *TA* is an internal quality related to the personal capacity to act and the professional behavior of individual teachers (Priestly, et al., 2012) in response to the stimuli offered in the learning environment (Gerstein, 2013). Collective *TA* is the professional competence situated and acted in a community of practice context in order to ensure educational quality through the prescriptive requirement of acting jointly to design and plan interventions.

"Achieving *agency* will always involve the interaction between individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors, all condensed in unique situations" (Biesta, Tedder, 2007).

Through the construction of communities of practice, the vision of *agency* can be conceived as a continuum between structurally reproductive *TA*, which confirms or reproduces existing structures, and structurally transformative TA, which creates new structures (Sloan, 2006).

From an integrated education system perspective, *professional TA* learning by teachers in the school community is composed of "skills, awareness of effectiveness and motivational factors that lead to the transformation of their teaching practices, experimentation of collective effectiveness, construction of positive interdependence, appreciation of reaching mutual agreements and use of active help-seeking strategies" (Pyhältö et al., 2015), all elements that must also involve students.

To develop *agency*, in addition to students, teachers and all school and academic actors must also be considered learners in knowing how to recognize both individual abilities and the broader set of relationships with all interested stakeholders that influence their learning. (OECD, 2018). The *agency* construct is therefore of an interactional and relational type, and highlights both being able to use the support of others and being a resource in itself for individual and social well-being (Edwards, 2005).

Inclusive Teacher Agency is an emerging theoretical construct.

Starting from the definition of *TA*, that is, the attitude of teachers to produce innovation at school (Leander, Osborne, 2008) and be capable of generating change (hopefully for the better), and from the model in an ecological perspective (Biesta, Tedder, 2006; 2007; Priestley et al., 2015a; 2015b), according to which "*agency* originates from the dialogic interaction between the individual efforts of the actors, the available resources and the contextual and structural factors that intertwine in ever new and unique ways" (Biesta, Tedder, 2007), some scholars have explored the transformative component of *teacher agency* in relation to school and social inclusion (Pantić, 2015; 2017b; Pantić, Florian, 2015).

Inclusive TA refers to a theoretical model that assumes inclusion and social justice as the ultimate goals of educational action and is a process in which teachers, constantly finding themselves in complex contexts characterized by ever-increasing cultural and social diversity, act strategically in order to guarantee everyone the best opportunities for educational success (Pantić, 2015).

Agency is influenced by micro factors (personal factors, ideas, beliefs), meso (cultures and practices specific to a school context) and macro (school policies, curriculum) (Pantić, 2017b).

Applying aspects of *agency* (Bandura, 2001; Giddens 1984; Archer, 2000) to teachers' work, Pantić (2015, 2017a) developed a model of *teachers' agency* oriented towards inclusion and social justice, which includes four sub-components or aspects of *inclusive TA*:

- Professional identity and its Sense of purpose (awareness of their role as agents, understanding of inclusion and social justice, commitment to acting to effect change);
- practical skills (inclusive pedagogical approach, which includes didactic and methodological innovation and collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders);
- autonomy (awareness of one's self-efficacy and use of one's value and talent, ability to create contextualized interactions and position oneself in relation to other relevant actors, communication and participation in decision-making processes)
- reflexivity (ability to analyze and systematically evaluate one's practices and institutional contexts, give transformative value to experiences by opening up to new perspectives and meanings).

Pantic' and Florian (2015) discuss the possibility of combining theories of inclusive pedagogy and *TA* to develop teachers' awareness of being *agents of inclusion* and social justice in teacher education by following four guidelines:

- cultivating commitment to inclusion and social justice as part of teachers' sense of purpose;
- developing skills in inclusive pedagogical approaches, including working with others;
- developing relational *agency* to transform the conditions of teachers' workplaces;
- the ability to reflect on their own practices, environments and work contexts.

Adapting the ecological model (Priestley et al., 2015b), additional factors that can promote or impede *inclusive TA* have been highlighted (Li, Rupper, 2020):

- teacher education (studies and experiences), professional development and field experience with students with SEN;
- the organization of the school and more generally the education system (structural factors);

- values and ideas on BES, disability, social justice (cultural factors);
- human resources, spaces (which can be with or without barriers), dispensatory and compensatory measures, aids and assistive and augmentative technologies;
- the "vision" on the evolution of one's professional role and on the future of students in terms of prospects and opportunities.

These models are interesting because they consider *Inclusive TA* as a phenomenon that can be implemented within the relational and temporal network involving not only teachers and students but also all the actors of the educational system (school, university, family, community included).

3. *Inclusive Teacher Agency* as a transformative logic for the co-construction of inclusive academic contexts: narration as a training device.

Resuming to the initial research question "In a *UDL* perspective, how does *Inclusive Teacher Agency* facilitate the inclusion process?" we also ask: How can we develop *Inclusive Teacher Agency* in university teachers? Through which methodologies can university teachers build their *Inclusive Teacher Agency* regarding their roles, skills, professional identity, professional habitus? Which devices can allow teachers to rethink being an inclusive teacher and, as an *agent of change*, being aware of their own *Inclusive TA*? Which settings help teachers to reflect on their professional experiences, on the perceived *Inclusive TA*, on the alignments or misalignments between what they are looking for, their inclusive skills and the consequences on students? These are just some of the questions that challenge us as researchers.

According to the logic of the *inclusive school agency*, whose distinctive feature is to assimilate variability and perturbability not as an exceptional element but as a structural element, inclusion is defined by a school in constant evolution socially and culturally predisposed to change where the role of the support teacher is fundamental in the co-construction of inclusive contexts (Amatori, 2019) as, in the same way, also the roles of the curricular teachers of schools and university professors.

Starting from this perspective and in the UDL perspective, the *Inclusive TA* as a transformative logic becomes the link between teacher training and environmental transformation, intending university teachers as active agents in terms of conscious actions oriented towards change and acting as good functional practices facilitating the inclusion process.

Based on the concept of variability and perturbability, no longer as an exception but as a constitutive trait of the school and the teaching profession (Amatori, 2019), the reflective (Schön, 1993) and meta-reflexive (Biesta et al., 2017) approach generated by narration turns out to be fundamental in signifying the transformation in progress (Corsi, 2024).

In teacher training, it is possible to find in narratives (and their different forms), as innovative approaches for inclusive training, functional training devices to access a generative space of self-transformation, of the educational and didactic relationship to give rise to the process of professionalization and recursive reconstruction of the professional identity or, "the habitus that a professional wears and that determines his perceptions, interpretations, analyses and decisions" (Altet, et al., 2006) and that allows to face the problems encountered in complex situations.

It is the awareness and verbalization of this habitus that makes the difference in professional development and, certainly, narration can be an indispensable tool (Giaconi, et al, 2021).

Being in the situation and reflecting on the action allows teachers to explore the processes that have favored the dialogue between being immersed in the context and knowing how to distance themselves from it according to a multi-perspective vision and reflection, improving their relational and inclusive skills both in terms of attitudes and behaviors and, in a prospective vision, also as an investment in a possible fallout in the design of inclusive teaching interventions (Rosa, 2024).

Several international studies highlight that the value dimension, precisely because it is able to guide action, becomes the foundation of every pedagogical and didactic practice; as a force capable of guiding behaviors and attitudes, of teachers first and foremost, it can generate barriers or facilitators around the person with disabilities, motivating positive rather than negative and discriminatory practices (WHO, 2011).

Studies on professional epistemology (Schön, 1993), on practices (Gherardi, 2012; Fabbri, 2007), on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2006), theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), transformative learning (Mezirow, Taylor, 2022; Taylor, 2002) and informal transformative learning (Marsick, Neaman, 2018), corroborating this theorization, constitute the conceptual anchors to refer to (Romano, 2020a). Reflection on experience to learn through experience and from experience is the fundamental component of that competence that allows teachers, professionals in the situation, to recognize and

manage the characteristics of complexity, value conflicts, uniqueness and indeterminacy of university contexts (Marsick, Neaman, 2018; Fabbri, 2019).

The *European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education*, Profile for Inclusive Teacher Professional Learning (2022), highlights the connection between the dimension of self-reflection and that of values, focusing on the need for teachers to promote continuous professional development and updating and a reflective attitude on school integration, inclusion and learning differences, placing the issue of self-awareness and one's positions in the geography of inclusion at the center (Sannipoli, Gaggioli, 2021).

In light of the previous reflections, teacher training should include a dual perspective: individual, to develop a solid cultural background to delve into disciplinary areas and multidisciplinary dimensions and, in terms of community of practice, collegial to build that collective and transversal organizational plan that educational phenomena require (Benvenuto, 2023).

In the teacher training system, situated professional learning (formal and informal) represents a fundamental point for *TA* as, through involvement in collaborative and interactive groups, it requires drawing on their intrinsic motivations, offering the opportunity to build solutions to the real challenges they face in educational contexts (instead of participating in generalized professional development sessions) by negotiating their own learning and practice through emergent learning experiences.

Communities of practice (CdP) in the academic field aim to promote sharing among teachers on problems, methods, strategies and approaches to university teaching (de Carvalho-Filho, Steinert, 2020), support *on-the-job* learning, professional development and institutional organization, contribute to educational research.

Within a community of practices, effective and efficient professional learning is functional to the maintenance and further development of *Inclusive TA*, allowing teachers to exercise it in order to position or re-position themselves in line with their objectives (not fixed) but deriving from the result of the interactions between the agent being and the structures, contexts and cultures in which they operate (Lieberman, 2009).

Involved in professional work groups, teachers (as individuals) build their own *collective agency* within which they make choices and positions influencing their work and their professional identity" (Hökkä, et al. 2017) conceiving themselves as *agents of change* who, as a reflective community, work in solidarity to build a change for an inclusive university and, in a broader perspective, for social change.

Teacher training is an open and dynamic system and is a continuous, long-term process, capable of developing in teachers an *Inclusive TA* that makes them capable of elaborating and proposing adequate responses to equally dynamic educational contexts subject to continuous changes, being a co-builder of inclusive educational contexts, knowing that they are useful to research, feeling part of a study community and mediator of reforms.

Conclusions

Schön's (1983) constructions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action allow us to thematize the processes supporting teachers' professional development in terms of dialogic settings to facilitate critical-reflective paths on experience and to be able to learn from the experience itself (Bracci, Romano, 2018).

If the practices that imply the cognitive activation of students and their involvement in evaluation processes, notoriously important for student learning, are in reality the least widespread in OCSE countries (Rossi, et al., 2023), it is possible to assume that they may still be little used and exercised even in the training and professional development of teachers.

By relating the dimension of self-reflection with the professional attitude oriented to research, it is highlighted that research and experimentation skills are fundamental to redesigning the professional profile of the teacher (Cottini, 2017).

Reflexivity and research are unavoidable dimensions for an “inevitable revision of training” aimed at training no longer an exclusively competent teacher, but a “teacher aware of the relativity of the operational solutions learned and practiced in school contexts and, therefore, oriented towards research and lifelong study: a “new teacher who [searches] for his “meaning” in research [itself]” (Murdaca, 2022).

It is desirable, then, to renew a dialogue between educational research and school/university, between educational research and teachers, between educational research and initial and in-service training processes of teachers convinced that transformative practices and renewed horizons of meaning can arise from this meeting (Batini, 2023).

Implementing knowledge and awareness of one’s *Inclusive TA* means encouraging teachers to consider themselves active agents within the inclusive school and social culture by encouraging their intrinsic motivation to invest in personal training and professional development (de Ruyter, Jos Kole, 2010).

Teachers' intrinsic motivation to engage in training initiatives for their inclusive professional development is a determining factor for their learning outcomes by providing a sense of purpose that pushes them to take responsibility for their own learning. In the complexity of the training process, it should be taken into consideration that the motivation to undertake professional development activities can also be linked to personal interests, perceived value or to satisfy objectives controlled by external factors.

The reflections presented here lead to the awareness that future research on *Inclusive TA* cannot ignore a conscious and critical reflection, also of a theoretical nature, on the very meaning of inclusion, of *agency i*n transformative logic and of *inclusive TA* in the academic field.

The university needs innovation devices and centers that promote research and training, situated research practices, dialogical and collective gatherings in which teachers can discuss, reflect and produce forms of knowledge useful for dealing with disorienting and, at times, unsolvable problems, thus moving towards a dimension of self-training and collective training (Romano, 2020a)

In this scenario, Teaching & Learning Centers (TLC) are formal research, training and consultancy centers designed to oversee experimentation and the dissemination of good practices and innovation on teaching and transversal skills and on the professional development of teachers (Romano, 2020a).

While the literature highlights that in recent years Teaching & Learning Centers have shown interest in offering professional development opportunities for individual professors, departments, colleges and institutions (Little, 2014), in Italy it is found that there are still few universities that have a structured university service for Faculty Development activities (Romano, 2020b).

On the other hand, although a large and growing scientific literature shows that supporting teachers' learning leads to better teaching which, in turn, improves students' learning outcomes (Sorcinelli, 2020), training on the educational and professional development of university teachers is a field of investigation yet to be explored.

In this context, investing in the activation of TLC and professional development is of fundamental importance to effectively improve not only the educational success of students but also to support the training needs of teachers, promote the lifelong learning skills necessary in the continuation of professional life, and incentivize institutional success and well-being.

For future studies, the question of promoting *Inclusive TA* as a transformative logic in the training paths of university teachers, on professional development and good practices for an inclusive university community remains open.

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