

## **THE ROLE OF THE HEADTEACHER IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOL INCLUSION ACTIONS**

### **IL RUOLO DEL DIRIGENTE SCOLASTICO NELLA GESTIONE DELLE AZIONI DI INCLUSIONE SCOLASTICA<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Abstract**

The paper presents the data emerging from a survey carried out on a sample of 336 school head teachers from a wide variety of school orders in all Italian regions. The research investigated the following areas: which aspects related to the inclusion of pupils with BES are managed personally by the headmaster and which aspects he delegates to: collaborators, instrumental functions, specialised teachers; how he manages relations with families and health personnel and the difficulties he encounters. The survey shows a constant participation of the S.D. in institutional meetings and a good ability to delegate to the system professional staff. There is a need for more training and participation in the school networks for the experimentation on issues regarding pedagogy and special education, in order to become more incisive leaders in the processes of inclusion of disabled students.

Il contributo presenta i dati emersi da un'indagine effettuata su un campione di 336 Dirigenti Scolastici, di diversi ordini di scuola, appartenenti a tutte le regioni italiane. La ricerca ha indagato i seguenti ambiti: quali aspetti relativi all'inclusione degli alunni con BES il dirigente gestisce personalmente e quali delega a collaboratori, funzioni strumentali, docenti specializzati; come gestisce i rapporti con le famiglie e il personale sanitario e quali difficoltà incontra. Dall'indagine emerge una partecipazione costante dei D.S. agli incontri istituzionali e una buona capacità di delega alle figure di sistema. Si evidenzia la necessità di una maggiore formazione e partecipazione a reti di scuole per la sperimentazione sulle tematiche di pedagogia e didattica speciale, per divenire leader maggiormente incisivi nei processi di inclusione degli studenti con disabilità.

#### **Key-words**

Leadership functions, inclusion, BES, lifelong learning

Funzioni dirigenziali, inclusione, BES, apprendimento permanente.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the expression of a synergic sharing by the two Authors. Giuseppe Filippo Dettori is the Author of Introduction and paragraphs 2 and 4; Barbara Letteri is the Author of Conclusions and paragraphs 1 and 3.

## **Introduction:**

After an arduous journey that took the school from exclusion to integration of all students in mainstream classes, the effort in the last twenty years has been to promote true inclusion of pupils with disorders and disabilities. Numerous regulations have highlighted the need for personalised teaching that meets the educational needs of those with Special Educational Needs (BES). Article 1 of the Ministerial Decree of 27 December 2012 states: "There are three main sub-categories: disability, specific developmental disorders and socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage", highlighting the fact that even students without certified disorders may, even temporarily, require personalised interventions. For these pupils, the school has to prepare tailor-made educational and didactic paths to support their learning, guide them in socialising with peers and stimulate them to achieve the highest possible degree of autonomy.

The international literature sets the bio-psycho-social model as the reference model for true inclusion, based on the indications of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF): a social change is needed in the way health, illness and disability are perceived. The ICF makes it unequivocally clear that an unfavourable environment is responsible for the social exclusion of the individual because it hinders his or her ability to play an active role in the society of which he or she is a member.

It is worth recalling, in this regard, the words of Canevaro (2014, p.102): "inclusion shifts the emphasis on contexts, recalls the principle of collective responsibility in the definition of integrated polis (contexts, learning and living environments), designed to create fair, just, legal, solidarity-based spaces, for each and everyone". The emergence of the inclusive school model has entailed a shift from the "illusory homogeneity" of learners and the idea that "we are all normal" (characteristic of the integration phase) to the idea that "we are all different" and that classes present a plurality of heterogeneous needs. Classes, now more than ever, are multicultural, multilingual and welcome pupils from different socio-cultural backgrounds who need to be understood and supported through personalised interventions (Striano et al., 2017). It is certainly not an easy task as during the school day teachers must have a range of methodologies and teaching skills to facilitate the learning of each pupil, including the severely disabled pupil. In order to guarantee quality inclusion, a coordinating role is indispensable which, by making the most of the school's specific skills and resources, represents effective pathways for each pupil. The role and functions of the School Director (SD) (art. 25 of Legislative Decree 165/2001) must therefore be developed on a pedagogical-professional leadership side and not only a managerial one (Moliterni, Covelli, 2020).

## **1. Inclusive education**

Article 3 of the Italian Constitution emphasises the State's commitment to guaranteeing the educational success of every pupil by removing any economic and social obstacles. The provisions of the Constitution are in line with: the Inclusive Teaching Guidelines implemented by five universities in the Triveneto region (UNI3V), the Inclusive Teaching Improvement Guidelines (CNUDD), UNESCO's Education for ALL and, finally, Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda: Quality Education.

Inclusive teaching is sometimes confused with the principle of giving everyone the same opportunities, but, in reality, the concept of equality must be overcome with that of equity: it is not a question of giving everyone the same opportunities, but of giving everyone what they need most to achieve effective goals (Ianes, Cramerotti, 2016, p.102). Thus, we move: 'from the centrality of teaching to the centrality of learning and from the teaching unit to the learning

unit' (Nota et al., 2015, p.128). In this valuing differences process: "teachers play a fundamental role in the processes of inclusion and protection and valorisation of differences and represent a precious and indispensable resource for the school. More value should be invested in these". (Fiorucci, 2017, p.82).

10 years ago, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, in its Profile of Inclusive Teachers, outlined four areas of competence on this regard. It underlined behaviour and personal beliefs, knowledge and understanding, fundamental competences and the skills to be developed for each one:

1. valuing pupil diversity as a resource and an asset and not as an obstacle;
2. supporting pupils by cultivating high expectations of their success at school;
3. the collaboration with others (working together with families and other professionals);
4. investing in lifelong professional development.

The headmaster plays a fundamental role in managing and organising all the actions implemented by the school's stakeholders in collaboration with the families and specialists who look after the student. This applies even in the promotion of an IEP based on the ICF, which there has been so much talk about in recent months. It is the responsibility of the SD to activate experimentation processes in schools that lead to finding inclusive models of effective planning (Lascioli, Pasqualotto, 2021).

An important document, even if not well-known, which discusses the inclusive perspective here above discussed, is the ministerial note n.1143 of 2018, entitled *L'autonomia Scuola quale fondamento per il successo formativo di ognuno* (School Autonomy as the basis of a successful training of everyone). As the title foretells, the document recalls the concept of school autonomy and emphasises the need for schools to take responsibility for making choices appropriate to the specific needs that arise, abandoning standardised paths that fail to meet the needs of those with specific disorders:

After having acquired a sensitivity linked to the identification and management of Special Educational Needs for many years, our educating communities can now go further: design new ways of schooling that help everyone to discover and increase their skills and abilities, and develop the awareness that learning is a wonderful opportunity strongly linked to the concreteness and quality of life. Students who find answers to their educational and self-expression needs in school will not fail, will not become unmotivated and finally, will not drop out.

Personalised teaching is also mentioned, namely all those strategies that teachers can put in place to identify particular aptitudes and propensities of students and cultivate them so that they are not lost due to lack of appreciation. True inclusion is achieved by working in close collaboration with parents, health personnel and the entire educational community, creating conditions for finding solutions to individual problems (Dettori, Carboni, 2021).

The school, and society in general, is therefore called upon to really design educational pathways that start from a careful analysis of the needs of all students.

"The challenge we need to take up becomes that of overcoming the adaptive and compensatory approach and adopting the perspective of inclusion, worrying about modifying the school system - as well as the social, work and service systems - in such a way as to make them correspond to the differences of all" (Pavone, 2015, pp. 34-35).

Despite the good intentions and numerous efforts for an inclusive school, evidence shows the ineffectiveness of the system in promoting an educational success of each and everyone (Istat, 2020). Therefore, the SD must take even greater care and attention in activating inclusive

pathways and strategies to prevent drop-outs and educational dispersion especially of those who struggle the most.

## 2.The Role of the Headmaster

International literature highlights the important role of the SD in fostering inclusion: the more he/she believes in it, the more he/she will be committed to promoting and demanding that teachers pay attention to students' differences for a more inclusive education (Park et al., 2021). However, studies highlight how his decision-making power is strongly swayed by political priorities aimed at valuing differences, especially in the area of providing adequate resources to ensure concrete actions for a socially just school system (Liasidou, Antoniou, 2015).

At the national level, the evaluation of the quality of school inclusion is an integral part of the school evaluation process, provided for in Article 6 of the Presidential Decree No 80 of 28 March 2013. The National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (INVALSI), when preparing the evaluation protocols and the reference frameworks of the self-evaluation reports, after consulting the Observatory for School Inclusion, referred to in Article 15 of this Decree, defines the indicators for the evaluation of the quality of school inclusion.

Paletta (2020) identifies a number of school actions for the implementation of an inclusive school:

- 1) *Define leadership*: school integration/inclusion is a founding value, a cultural assumption that requires vigorous managerial and relational leadership from the SD, a key figure in building such a system.
- 2) *Managing the curriculum and didactics*: this is achieved through the following actions: supervising and assessing didactics, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring progress, protecting didactics from interference, offering didactic support, identifying working staff.
- 3) *Redesigning the organisation*: this is done by creating a collaborative culture with the family and the wider community. Each school institution, within the framework of the definition of the three-year educational offer plan, is called upon to prepare the Plan for Inclusion that defines the modalities for the coordinated use of resources.
- 4) *Developing human resources*. This is a very delicate task that is up to the school leader and made through choices that include offering incentives to teachers for continuous training and promoting professional development.

The headmaster is responsible for organising the inclusion of pupils with disabilities and supervising the implementation of what is decided in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the Personalised Educational Plan (PEP). The SD's task is to assign pupils with disabilities to the various classes, define timetables, plan meetings, manage all formal documentation and, in general, coordinate the various activities that require the collaboration of several people.

The August 2009 guidelines for the school integration of pupils with disabilities stated that: "The school headmaster is the guarantor of the educational offer, which is planned and implemented by the school institution: this implies all students and, therefore, pupils with disabilities as well". The managerial leadership is also achieved through the promotion and care of a series of measures to be implemented in consultation with the various school components. These should demonstrate the effective commitment of the headmaster and the school in issues such as: training courses, programs which improve school services for pupils with disabilities, projects, initiatives which would imply the involvement of parents and the territory, the establishment of school networks for objectives concerning inclusion.

Furthermore, its role is fundamental in the following areas: participating in GLO meetings, setting up the GLI, fostering educational-didactic continuity, activating programmes to improve the school service for pupils with disabilities, participating in the stipulation of programme agreements at the area plans level, activating specific orientation actions to ensure continuity in taking care of the subject, undertaking the necessary initiatives to identify and remove any architectural barriers. These indications have also been referred to in the implementing regulations of Legislative Decree no. 66/2017 and Legislative Decree no. 96/2019.

A recent survey examined teachers' views on the role of the head teacher in the school's inclusive processes. The survey shows a marked correlation between the SD's ability to plan and organise inclusive strategies in a shared and synergic way and the school system's ability to co-construct co-evolutionary practices capable of developing the sense and meaning of school inclusion, enhancing the contribution of all subjects both inside and outside the school and operating in the territory, in a framework of co-responsibility resulting from educational alliances (Moliterni, Covelli, 2020).

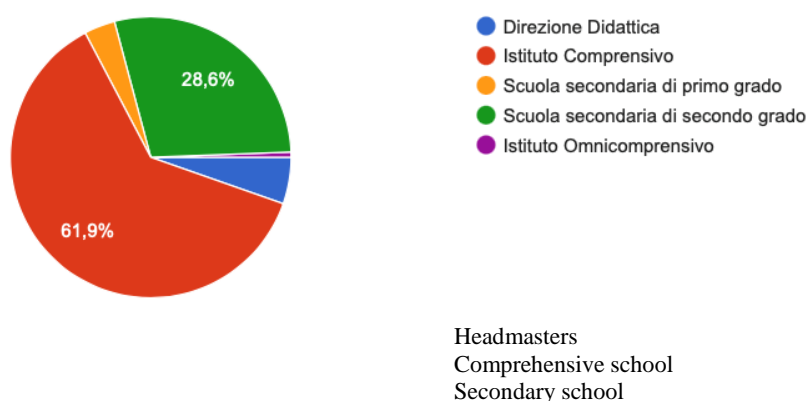
### The research: objectives, methodology, sample

The aim of the research described below was to understand the degree of inclusive actions activated in the owning institutions by the directors of various Italian schools. It focused more specifically on the following questions:

- 1) Which areas does the SD personally manage in relation to the inclusion of pupils with BES and which aspects does he delegate to collaborators, instrumental functions, and to specialised teachers?
- 2) What is the SD's interest in issues related to inclusion and how does he manage relations with families and health personnel?
- 3) How is the staff used? How effectively do the system figures operate and what are the main critical points he/she encounters?

A survey involving 336 school directors in all Italian regions was conducted by way of a questionnaire (available at <https://urly.it/3h1gm>). It contained 47 inquiries, both of the closed (multiple choice, Yes/No) and open-ended type, and focused on the inclusive actions implemented within their school.

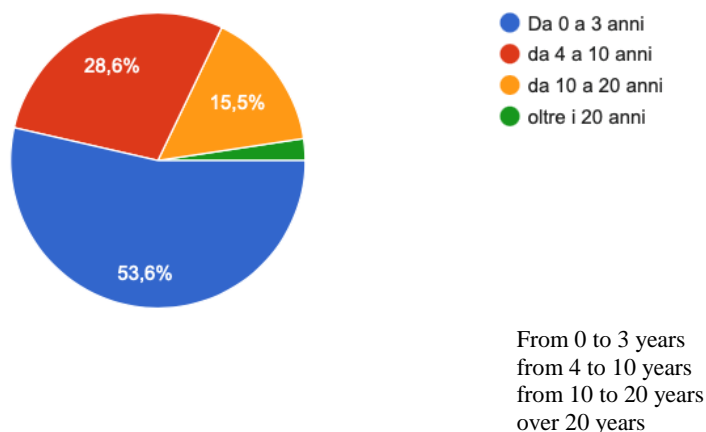
The research sample was distributed equally and involved the participation of 61.9% (208) of the Headmasters of the Comprehensive School, 28.6% (96) who head upper Secondary Schools, 5.4% (18) of the headmasters and 3.6% (12) of Secondary Schools. Only two Headmasters (0.6%) head all-inclusive institutions (Graph 1)



Upper secondary school  
All-inclusive institute

Graph 1: school affiliation

53.6% of them (180) have been SD for less than 3 years, 28.6% (96) for 4 to 10 years, 15.5% (52) for more than 10 years and only 2.4% (8) for more than 20 years (Graph 2).



Graph 2: length of service as Headmaster

### 3. Research results

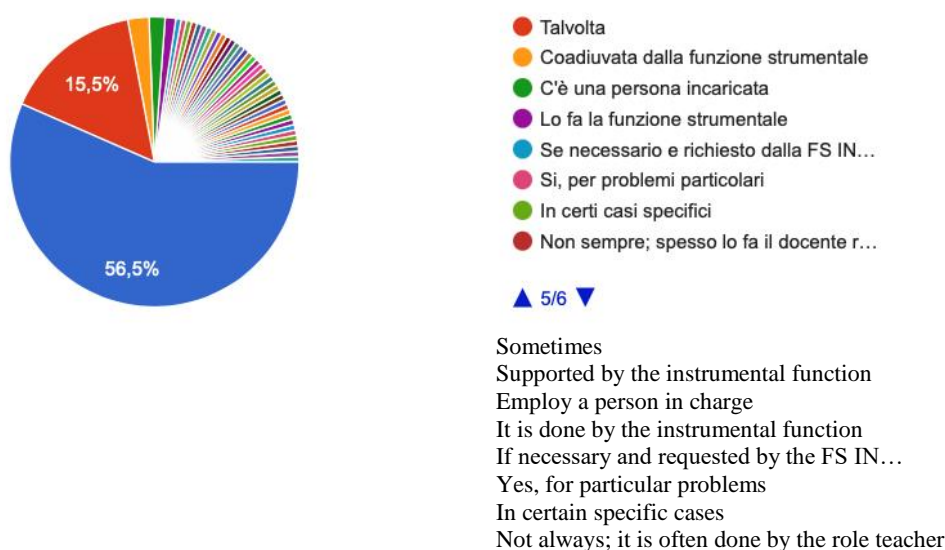
With regard to the first question "Do you participate in the meetings organised by the Local Authorities (EE.LL.) to deal with issues related to inclusion?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). The majority of SD 33.9% (114) answered that they always participate, 22% (74) often, 18.5% (62) quite often, 14.3% (48) sometimes and 11.3% (38) declared that they never participate because such meetings are not organised by the local authorities of reference.

With regard to the second question "Do you participate in the activities organised by the local and/or provincial Pole Institutes for Inclusion?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). The majority, 28.6% of SD (96) answered that they always participate, 26.2% (88) often, 16.1% (52) quite often, 18.5% (62) sometimes and 19.7% (36) declared that they never participate because such meetings are not organised by the Pole Institutes of reference or are reserved for the inclusion referents.

With regard to the third question "Do you participate in the meetings of the GLI (Working Group for Inclusion) of your school?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). The majority, 62.5%, of the Managers (210) answered that they always participate, 15.5% (52) often, 13.7% (46) quite often, 7.1% (24) sometimes and 1.2% (4) declared that they never participate because they have little time available because they are busy with other tasks.

With regard to the question "Do you personally deal with the families of pupils with Special Educational Needs (BES)?" 56.5% of Head teachers (190) state that they personally deal with families while 15.5% (52) do not. 28% of them declare to delegate mainly the instrumental

function, to intervene, if necessary, in particular situations or at the request of teachers or families (Graph 3).



Graph 3: relations with families

In the case of dealing with the health operators who look after certified pupils, 54.8% of SD (194) declares to personally take care of dealing with the health operators while 19.6% (66) do not. 25.6% declares to delegate mainly the instrumental function, to intervene, if necessary, in particular situations or at the request of teachers or families. 25.6% states that they mainly delegate the instrumental function, to intervene, if necessary, for particular situations or at the request of teachers or families.

With regard to the next question "Do you participate in TGI (Territorial Working Group) meetings?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (1= never to 5= always). The majority, 55.4%, of managers (186) answered that they never participate because they are not part of the group, 14.9% (50) sometimes, 13.7% (46) quite often, 7.7% (26) often and 8.3% (28) said they always participate as a member of the group.

In response to the question "Do you participate in GLO (operational working group) meetings in your institution?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 33.9% of Head teachers (114) said they always attend, 22.6% (76) said equally often or fairly often, 19.6% (66) sometimes and 1.2% (4) said they never attend because the task is delegated to class teachers because it is impossible for the SD to attend them all.

In response to the question "Do you participate in the drafting of the IAP (Annual Plan for Inclusion) of your school?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 58.9% of managers (198) said they always participate, 17.9% (60) often, 11.3% (38) quite often, 10.1% (34) sometimes and 1.8% (6) said they never participate because the GLI and the instrumental function take care of it.

In response to the question "How often are issues related to the inclusion of students with disabilities addressed in the Teachers' Board?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 39.9% of the Managers (134) state that they address

issues related to inclusion in the Teachers' Board quite often, 29.8% (100) often, 20.2% (68) always, 10.1% (34) sometimes.

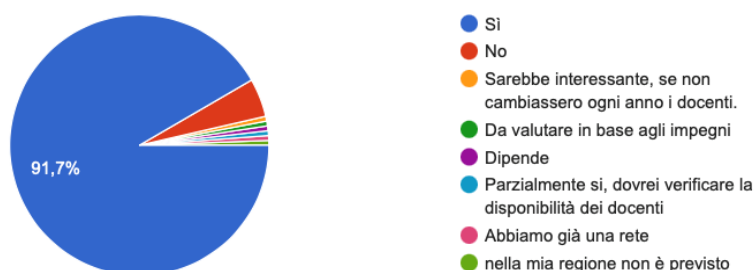
In response to the next question "How often are issues related to the inclusion of students with disabilities addressed in the school council?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 32.1% of the headmasters (108) state that they address issues related to inclusion in the school council sometimes, 31.5% (106) quite often, 25% (84) often, 8.3% (28) always and 3% state that they never address these issues because they believe it is not the competence of the collegiate body.

In response to the question "Are issues related to the inclusion of students with disabilities addressed during joint department and/or class, intersection or interclass meetings?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 45.8% of Head teachers (144) stated that issues related to inclusion are always addressed, 28.6% (96) often, 21.4% (84) quite often, 3.6% (12) sometimes and 0.6% (2) stated that they never address these issues for privacy reasons.

In response to the question "How often is a support teacher appointed as a class coordinator in secondary schools?" participants were asked to reply on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1= never to 5= always). 47.6% of the Head teachers (160) stated that they appointed him/her sometimes, 19.6% (66) quite often, 10.7% (36) often, 3% (10) always. 19% (64) declared that they had never appointed them because support teachers are often on fixed-term contracts, refuse the assignment or it is reserved for curricular teachers with more hours in the classroom.

For the following question "Are questionnaires inquiring about the degree of school inclusion prepared in your institute?" respondents had more than one choice. 44% of the managers (148) declared to have prepared it for the teachers, 40,5% (136) declared to have prepared it for the families, 21,4% (72) declared to have prepared it for the pupils, while 36,3% (122) did not foresee the preparation of these questionnaires because they had not yet been planned and/or were in the process of being prepared.

In response to the last question presented, "Would you be willing to carry out, in collaboration with a network involving other schools, experimentation and/or research-action activities to favour the inclusion of pupils with disabilities?" as many as 91.7% (308) Head teachers declare themselves willing to carry out experimentation activities and only 4.8% are not willing or are considering doing so (Graph 4).



Yes  
No  
This would be interesting, but in the case that a change of teacher every year does not occur.  
To be assessed based on other obligations  
It depends

Partially yes, I would have to check with the teachers  
A network already exists  
Does not apply in my region

Graph 4: willingness to experiment on inclusion

## 4. Discussion

An initial datum emerging from the research shows that the majority of SD (53,6%) who participated in the survey have between 0 to 3 years of service; this may be the reason why they declare not participating in provincial and regional working groups and do not to know their purpose and functions.

Another aspect to highlight and which concerns the sample is that the participants come from all of the Italian regions; this aspect is very important because the results of the survey reflect the whole country's situation with regards to inclusion.

A first piece of data concerns the SD's coordination of the working groups on inclusion (GLI) and of the elaboration of the IAP. This is especially interesting because it proves that the head of the school believes in the importance of promoting, supervising and investing in inclusion. The survey shows that in all schools there is a referent for inclusion (97.6%) who assists and supports the head teacher in the various issues related to inclusion. As highlighted by other studies, the inclusion for students with disabilities may only sometimes be managed by the SD. In these cases, they will include the most urgent or complex issues, especially in relations with families while organisational activities and planning/assessment/certification of competences are delegated to support teachers and class teachers coordinated by the instrumental function or the inclusion contact person (Pavone, 2015).

Inclusion issues are often discussed in 39.9% of cases in the teachers' board and in 32.2% of cases in the school council. These data suggest that only the most general issues are discussed in the collegial bodies who are in charge of making important decisions (e.g. investing in staff training), while individual aspects are discussed by the teaching team in collaboration with families and specialists. This finding is confirmed by other studies that have highlighted that inclusion is, above all, the responsibility of the teaching team that knows the children and has an ongoing dialogue with the families and health personnel (Moliterni, Covelli, 2020).

Only 10.7% of the participants affirmed that they often appointed a support teacher as class coordinator in the secondary school; the reason for such a low involvement of support teachers, who often have more hours than others in the class, concerns the fact that many do not have a permanent working contract. Once again, the school's difficulty in considering the support teacher as a class teacher emerges (Cottini, 2017).

When asked, and given more than one possibility as a response, about the preparation of questionnaires that survey the degree of school inclusion, 44% of the SD declared to have done so for teachers, 40.5% for families, 21.4% for pupils, while 36.3% did not provide any questionnaires. In addition to the worrisome fact that 36.3% did not foresee such activities, even though it was strongly requested by the Ministry, it appears that students are also not very involved in the evaluation of the quality of inclusive processes. Other surveys have found this to be true as well (Dettori, Pirisino, 2021).

Finally, the research shows the great willingness on the part of SD (91.7%) to carry out, in a network and/or in collaboration with universities, training and experimentation courses to make their schools more inclusive.

## Conclusions and research perspectives

An inclusive school is the result of the sensitivity and the commitment of each school operator and, first and foremost, of the School Director who must ensure its implementation. In fact, training teachers in promoting inclusive processes in schools may not be enough if the head teacher is not headed nor trained in this direction. Teachers must be able to find, especially in the SD, individuals capable of fostering the best working conditions and to remove the obstacles that may hinder the full development of the person, as established in Article 3, paragraph 2, of the Constitution of our Republic.

Autonomy constitutes the space for self-determination that makes it possible to customise curricula in the connection between what is already established and organised and what is to be organised in an instituted form, in the increasingly conscious interweaving of the explicit and implicit dimensions of curricula. The SD is responsible for directing, coordinating and enhancing human resources all the while respecting the competences of the collegiate bodies.

The above-mentioned research shows, on the one hand, the involvement of the head teacher in the school's various inclusive activities and, on the other, the lack of his or her constant participation in other provincial and regional bodies, whose specific responsibilities are often unknown to those interviewed. It would seem, therefore, that the head teacher often finds himself alone in coordinating issues related to school inclusion. This is perhaps the reason why he/she declares willingness to participate in working groups and experimentation.

A, future, research through focus-groups would be useful in analysing the areas in which the SD could benefit from being part of working groups composed of colleagues, experts, researchers and health personnel dealing with different issues related to inclusion, in order to improve his/her management competence, share effective strategies and perceive himself/herself as more competent in the role of leading the educational community.

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