

PRAXEOLOGY AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHING. RESULTS OF AN INQUIRY AT UNIVERSITY

PRASSEOLOGIA E AGIRE INCLUSIVO NEI FUTURI INSEGNANTI DI SOSTEGNO RISULTATI DI UN'INDAGINE ESPLORATIVA NELL'AMBIENTE UNIVERSITARIO

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Abstract

The present work aims at obtaining an insight into the inclusive practices (Altomari et al., 2020; D'Alonzo, Maggiolini, 2020) of future special needs teachers studying at the Universities of Reggio Calabria (Italy) with a focus on universal designing as an important reference point for the implementation of inclusive processes. More specifically, it endeavors to situate the Universal Design for Learning (Black et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2014; Murawski, Scott, 2021) within a praxeological dimension (Parlebas, 2005; 2003; 2001; 1999; Lagardera, Lavega, 2003). A cultural approach of the aforesaid kind sets out to reach beyond disability as an unsurmountable barrier and valorizes the special needs teacher's design and the special needs student's self-determination (Cottini, 2016). In this light, we cannot fail to reckon with praxeological studies of motor behavior as crucial to individual and social life.

La presente ricerca intende indagare sull'agire inclusivo (Altomari et al., 2020; D'Alonzo, Maggiolini, 2020) dei futuri docenti di sostegno dell'Università di Reggio Calabria allo scopo di mettere in risalto come l'idea di progettare in modo universale possa rappresentare un ulteriore riferimento per l'implementazione dell'inclusione, declinandolo altresì nella dimensione della prasseologia. Più specificamente, lo studio intende declinare il costrutto pedagogico dell'Universal Design for Learning (Black et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2014; Murawski, Scott, 2021) nella dimensione della prasseologia (Parlebas, 2005; 2003; 2001; 1999; Lagardera, Lavega, 2003). Infatti, un approccio culturale di questo tipo muove verso il superamento della concezione della disabilità come limite insuperabile e valorizza il ruolo della progettualità e dell'autodeterminazione nella persona con disabilità (Cottini, 2016), riconoscendo nei suggerimenti della prasseologia lo studio delle condotte motorie come fondamentali per la vita individuale e sociale.

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Key-words

Praxeology, Universal Design for Learning, didactics, Special Needs teacher, University.

Prasseologia, Universal Design for Learning, didattica, insegnanti di sostegno, contesto universitario.

Introduction

By considering motricity crucial to anyone's social life, Praxeology has made scientific points and theoretic claims that could act as important interpretive keys in teaching and learning. By enabling all students to fully participate in school life, the application of the UDL pedagogic paradigm could pave the way for flexible and multi-shaped breakthroughs in education. A detailed reflection on inclusivity-oriented Universal Designing and Praxeology should foster new educational developments that could be implemented quite effectively in Italian schools. Applying Praxeology and Universal Design for Learning to Italian schooling could thus be “the right educational recipe” for us to best valorize diversity. This can be done by fully re-thinking the teaching and learning contexts where differences are found and fully re-devising the modes of expression to deal with them in the most inclusive way. The construction of an integrated educational model would inevitably entail a decisive change in perspective, one that would be in line with an innovative synergic scientific interaction with, and interpretation of, plural approaches and divergent approaches.

1. Motor Praxeology

The present international debate on Motor Praxeology induces us to make inter- and multi-disciplinary considerations on the developmental play-movement relation which Lavega summarized as an unbreakable bond between action and the world around.

As it has come from different scientific milieus, this invitation has provided the international scientific panorama with a new key for reading and interpreting motricity bio-psycho-socially based on the analysis of motor attitudes.

Be it ludic or motor, every activity that entails motion is to be read and interpreted as a complexive system whereby its logically-ordered components are the manifestation of fundamental acts/movements which are combined by the interconnection of anatomic-physiological-structural-cognitive-historical-social conditions materialize and express themselves through a praxeo-motor set that is functional to the socio-ludic transmission of cultural values.

Praxeology's starting point is not a choice of axioms and of a decision on procedural methods; it is in fact a consideration of the essence of the action. Needless to say, as Parlebas pointed out, the world around crucially influences knowledge as a complexive structure, types of interactions, main features, decision-making processes, all underlying a motor behavior whereby all components vary interactively. Hence, if every motor act is an adaptation of motor attitudes, a possible analytical study could provide us with interesting educational concepts for interpreting the relation between inclusivity and motricity as a new socio-cultural scope can be identified which interprets popular tradition through playing, body-consciousness and movement. Starting from a praxeological concept, every motor attitude results from objective observable manifestations of the movement and the subjective meaning associated to it. Therefore, motor attitudes are the manifestation of the motor experience as defined by interdependence of the five dimensions of personality:

- *cognitive,*
- *socio-relational,*

- *biologic*,
- *expressive*
- *affective*

Thus, Lagardera and Lavega (2003) regard motor attitudes as socio-psycho-motor expressions of the components of the individual's personality, i.e. the cognitive, affective, relational, expressive and decision-making dimensions (Ferretti, 2008, p. 32).

Parlebas' original contribution (2003) consists in his focus on the motor biography of each and every subjects, a parametre for locating and selecting motor practices within a catalogue of motor attitudes to be adapted to psycho- and socio-motor situations.

In this sense, an integrated reading of motor attitudes paves the way for a revisitation of how inclusively body-in-motion awareness is dealt with – going well beyond the superficial relation between ability and disability, between competence and impairment, connecting seemingly distant sectors of scientific research, revisiting the educational approach to diversity, leaving room for a possible relation between Praxeology and Universal Design For Learning as a synthesis of equal and complementary views of teaching and learning.

2. Universal Design for Learning

The UDL paradigm is based on Cognitive Psychology studies, particularly on Vigotskij's proximal development zone theory (1974) and the Neuro-Science studies (Bear et al., 2007; Oliverio, 2012; Geake, 2016) which have confirmed the main feature of brain diversity, variability and uniqueness of any individual's learning processes.

Universal Design for Learning is based upon a set of principles and guidelines which define a model for the creation of teaching, methodologic and grading objectives that hold good for all pupils, inasmuch as they specifically aim at developing a curriculum and devising new teaching and learning methods.

It is a model for designing teaching materials, methods and strategies which no longer aims at devising personalized actions which stand far away from teaching standards, but at building an *a-priori* tool everybody can use, whose wide accessibility depends on a flexible approach that can be tailored for each student and fosters student participation, involvement and learning straight from his/her personal abilities (Valenti, 2019).

UDL philosophy is based on the assumption that diversity is a necessary condition, so, along with clearly visible differences, other more hidden ones must be reckoned with, as has been shown by that Neuro-Science research that acknowledges the existence of variable learning

styles. All this entails our adoption of various teaching modes in an effort to meet the differences between various students (Ghedin, Mazzocut, 2017).

UDL's main objective is “to transfer the principles of designing for everybody from production and architecture to education, through an action centred on study programs that come to be of hindrance to the promotion of inclusivity (...) when they are not flexible” (Cottini, 2017, p.82). As has been witnessed by several international studies (Black et al., 2015; Katz, 2015; Evans et al., 2010), the use of Universal Design for Learning at school improves learning in special needs students.

This teaching approach is based upon 3 important principles:

- *what we teach*: the concept of reasonable adjustment the UNO Convention already expressed on the rights of people with disabilities, whereby every necessary measure must be taken in order to meet anyone's needs; more substantially, educational action can be taken on the physical features of information, on the prediction of teaching and/or learning alternatives, on concepts and notions and on the use of supports that facilitate comprehension (Cottini, 2019);

- *how what we teach is learned*: the provision of various means of action and expression that would allow students to choose how to decide and share what they have learned and, once this level has been reached, a flexible curriculum will be devised which features real-life tasks;

- *why what we teach needs to be learned*: the provision of manifold means to involve students so as to give them various stimuli for wanting to learn; the involvement can be obtained by connecting learning to real-life problems without overlooking their emotional-relational dimension (Evans et al., 2010).

J. Katz' international studies (2015) evince that the application of the principles of this paradigm improves student interaction and creates a positive learning setting.

Italian research (Aquario et al., 2017; Ghedin & Mazzocut, 2017) has focused on the application of the 3 UDL principles at school.

Although the UDL approach is not yet so popular at school, the results of other studies (Ghedini & Mazzocut, 2017; Montesano et al., 2019) show that some teachers have long adopted inclusive practices of this kind.

After all, a congruous example of the application of the Universal Design for Learning is the popular Rubik's cube, which has been designed also for the sight-impaired (with white faces and numerous tactile features). All this means that, in a UDL-based view, what is indispensable for someone is also useful for everyone.

2.1. An Inclusive UDL-Based Curriculum

Inclusive education sets out to meet the most diverse needs of individual students by an educational organization that can develop flexibly.

D. Ianes (2019) suggests that we enter the logic of universality and equality put together into a totally new perspective – univers-equality (Ianes, 2019)⁴ – whose practices are, then again, based upon universality- and equality-related topics.

Thus, we are left with a model of school whereby each and every pupil is given the opportunity of achieving his/her educational success, the educational context belongs to everybody and anyone's potential is developed without overlooking the right to self-determination and reasonable adjustment (Italian Legislative Decree 66/2017, Art.1).

It is important to acknowledge that, if the aim of inclusion is to have pupils perform common tasks, then it is necessary to make changes to the common curriculum, changes that make for an educational differentiation to include the needs of all students to the greatest possible extent. A curriculum becomes inclusive when it takes into account the differences between the various students, thus becoming a coherent teaching and learning route that aims at putting contents and learning processes at the same level.

Thus, designing an inclusive curriculum enables each pupil to feel accepted and stimulated as early as possible, and the class context becomes more and more of a welcoming setting where each and every one is accepted and taken into consideration.

Universal Design for Learning is a founding element of an inclusive curriculum: it is a way of designing teaching materials, methods and strategies on an *a priori* basis through a flexible approach tailored for each student (Sgambelluri, 2020).

This educational approach basically makes the path of true inclusivity much smoother by flipping the educational perspective – designing, from the very beginning, educational actions which can be adapted to each and every student. This is a huge paradigmatic change in

⁴ <https://www.orizzontescuola.it/convegno-erickson-rimini-evoluzione-concetto-inclusione-quello-univers-quita/>

educational design, one which entails starting from the notion of the individual and avoiding any form of discrimination in teaching and learning (Sgambelluri, 2020).

3. Research

Objective

In line with the theoretical reference framework, the present study aims at investigating the inclusivity practices of future special needs teachers and the educational role of motricity in UDL.

Methods and Tools

The investigation has been carried out through a 34-question survey that was administered to students in a Master's Degree course in special needs teaching at the Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, Italy. Statistical Analyses were carried out in advance in order to identify the reference sample according to gender, age-group, qualification, degree of specialization and teaching experience. Before carrying out statistical analyses on the questions about the inclusive practices of future special needs teachers and the educational role of motricity in teaching and learning, the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed by calculating Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. The Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated later in order to identify possible linear correlation indices between answers.

Results and Discussions

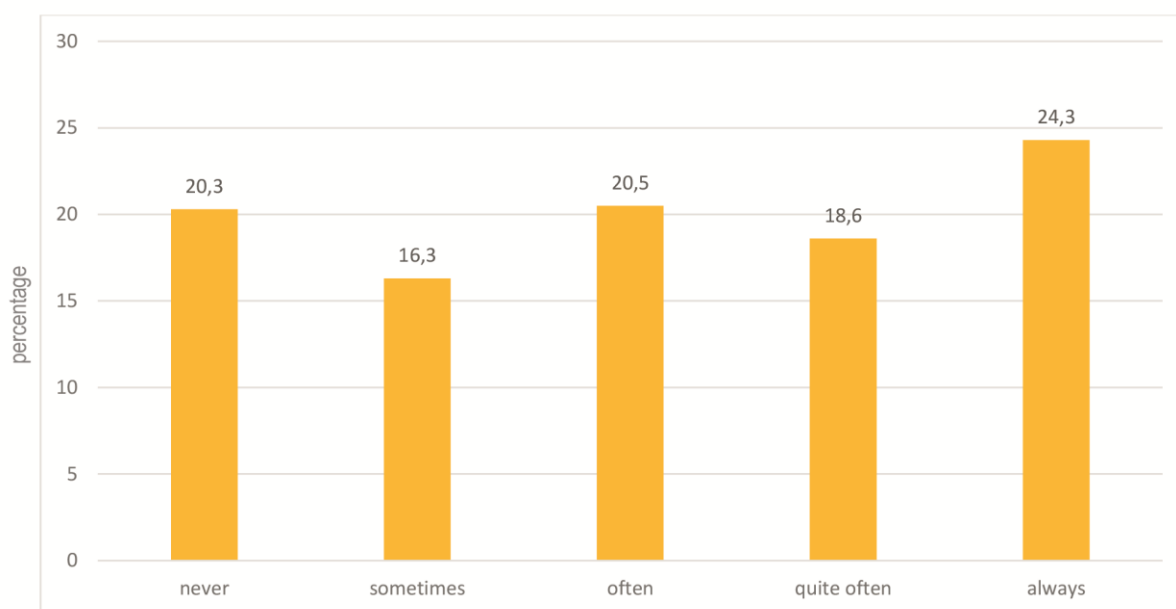
The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.59 (Cronbach's Alpha). The questionnaire was administered to 677 subjects, 559 (82.6%) female and 118 (17.4%) male. The sample was divided into four age-groups: 20-30 (11%), 30-40 (40.8%), 40-50 (37.7%) and 50-60 (10.5%). As regards qualification, 73.8% of the sample have a Bachelor's or Master's degree, 5.2 % a 3-year degree and 21.1% a Senior High School diploma.

As for the degree of specialization, the sample has been distributed as such: 39.9% future Senior High School teachers, 33.7% future Junior High School teachers, 22.5% future Primary School teachers and 3.8% future Pre-School teachers. 67.7% of the sample have already had teaching experience (60.4% taught 0-3-year-old pupils, 32.8% taught to 4-10-year-old pupils, the remnant respondents taught to 10-year-old students) across Italy.

Data analysis evinces a positive impact of inclusivity on the development of personality in students with disabilities inasmuch as they have learned more about their own conditions and

have become more aware of their own special needs (93% of the respondents) and it is important to resort to universal design for the special needs teacher to create a more inclusive educational context (86% of the respondents). Most future special needs teachers think they can make a “reasonable adjustment” in order to ensure people with disabilities can enjoy and exert, if need be, all human rights and fundamental liberties. The “reasonable adjustment” structure is in line with what the UNO Convention on the Human Rights of People with Disabilities expressed in 2006, as well as with the UDL first principle (based on “*what we teach*”) which commits the institutions to taking every necessary measure in order to meet anyone's needs. More substantially, educational action can be taken on the physical features of information and on the prediction of teaching and/or learning alternatives in order to facilitate comprehension.

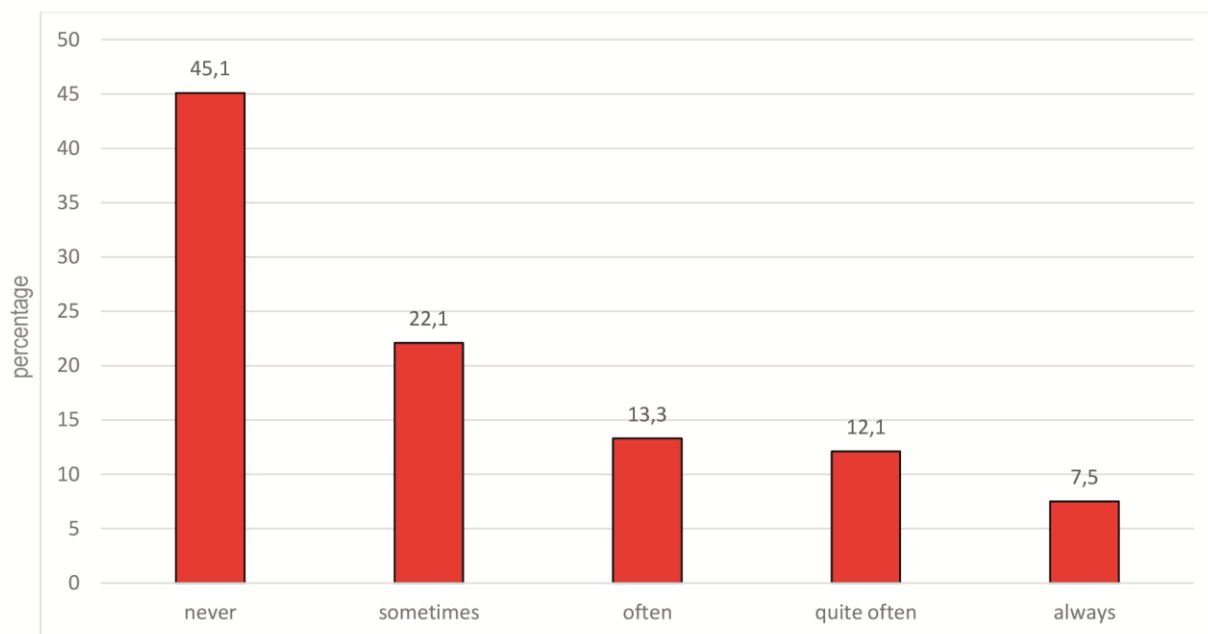
A high variability has been observed in the answers about classroom accessibility for students with disabilities (Graph 1). Teacher opinion is rather divided, probably owing to the diversity of regional contexts where gained their teaching experiences. The various responses show the absence of lifts or the presence of steps and staircases as the most denounced barriers.



Graph 1. Classroom accessibility for students with disabilities (data expressed in percentage of the total amount of respondents)

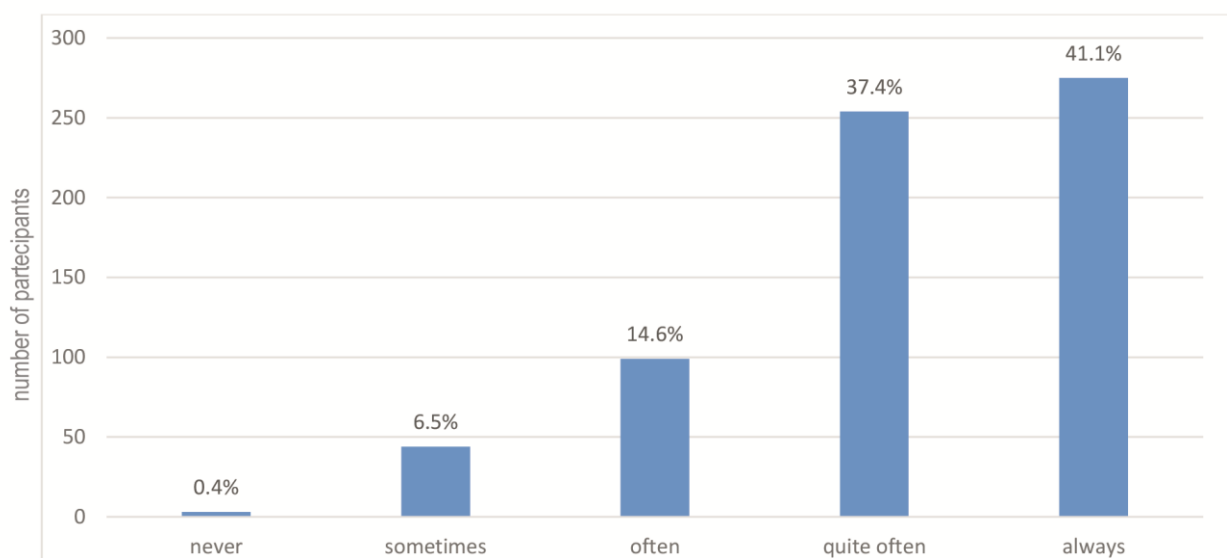
the most significant data of the survey indicate the future special needs teachers' favourable collective response on the inclusive role of motricity in education. The importance of motricity at school as a factor of inclusivity and aggregation is now a fact (eg, cf. Block, Vogler, 1994; Goodwin, Watkinson, 2000; Bertagna, 2005; de Anna, 2009; Moliterni, 2013). Both students with disabilities and students without disabilities can benefit from physico-inclusive education, which offers various opportunities to develop moto-relational abilities (Seymour, Reid, Bloom, 2009) and has a positive impact on the attitudes students without disabilities nourish towards disability itself (Slininger, Sherrill, Jankowski 2000). Therefore, inclusive physical education can be useful for the disabled student and his/her schoolmates to contribute to developing each and every one's physical and psycho-social well-being.

83% of the future special needs students think “motricity can lead to designing P.E. lessons on an inclusivity basis”, and to this end “it is important to resort to physical settings without barriers by designing inclusivity-oriented motricity spaces”. On the other hand, 67% of respondents denounce the scarcity or absence of inclusive motricity- and sport-oriented guidelines and initiatives in the schools where they taught (Graph 2).

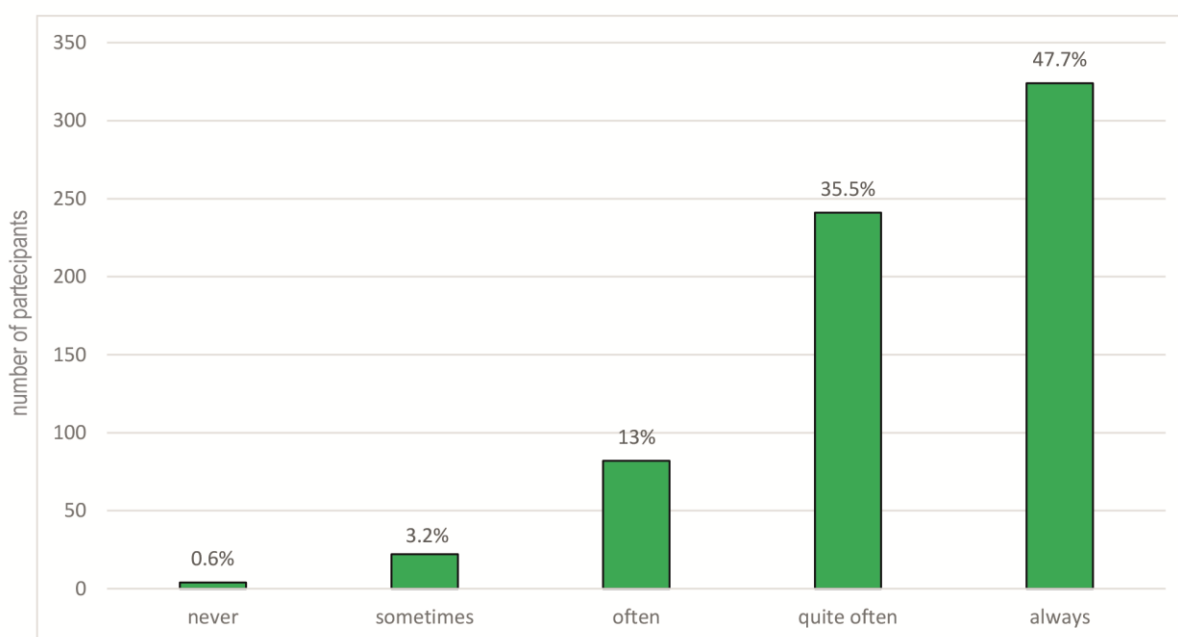


Graph 2. Inclusive motricity- and sport-oriented guidelines and initiatives (data expressed in percentage of the total amount of respondents)

Through *ad-hoc* educational provisions, teachers should enhance the disabled's motricity skills and abilities (88%). Most future special needs teachers say “motor attitudes (eg., intentions, perceptions, emotions) are ways of expressing their own personalities”. The Pearson correlation coefficient calculation shows sensible coherence between various answers, especially those about the inclusive role of motricity in education, which further confirms its importance at school. The maximum correlation value (0.67) was observed between questions that were answered as follows: “designing a [motricity] lesson can help [a special needs teacher to] understand the motricity behaviours of special-needs pupils” (Graph 3) and “motricity knowledge can orient special-needs teachers to design motricity lessons inclusively” (Graph 4).



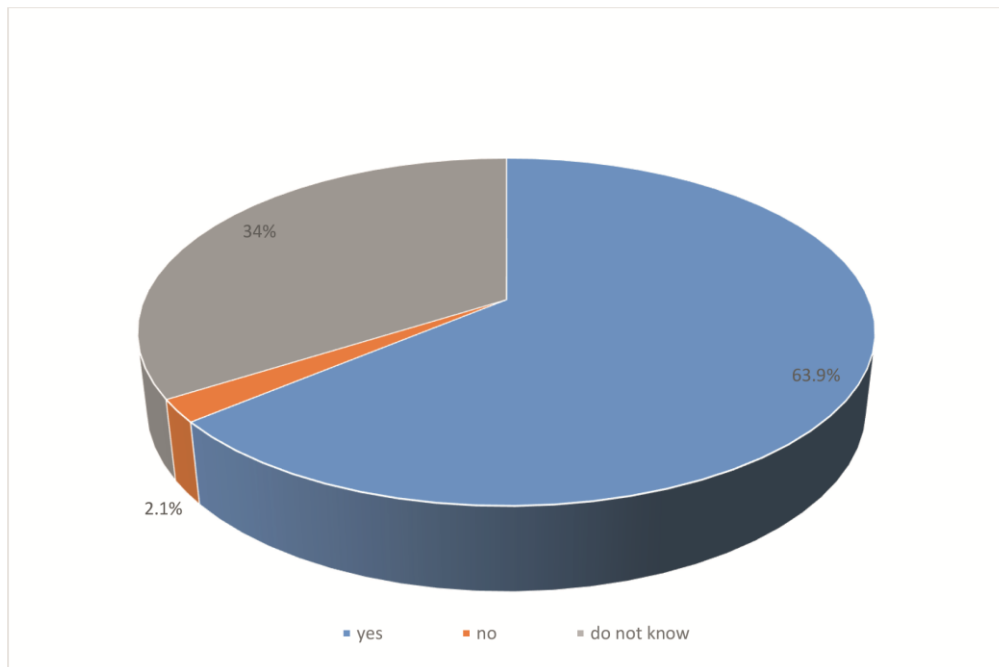
Graph 3. Designing a lesson can help understand the motor behaviours of special-needs pupils (data expressed as a percentage of the total amount of respondents)



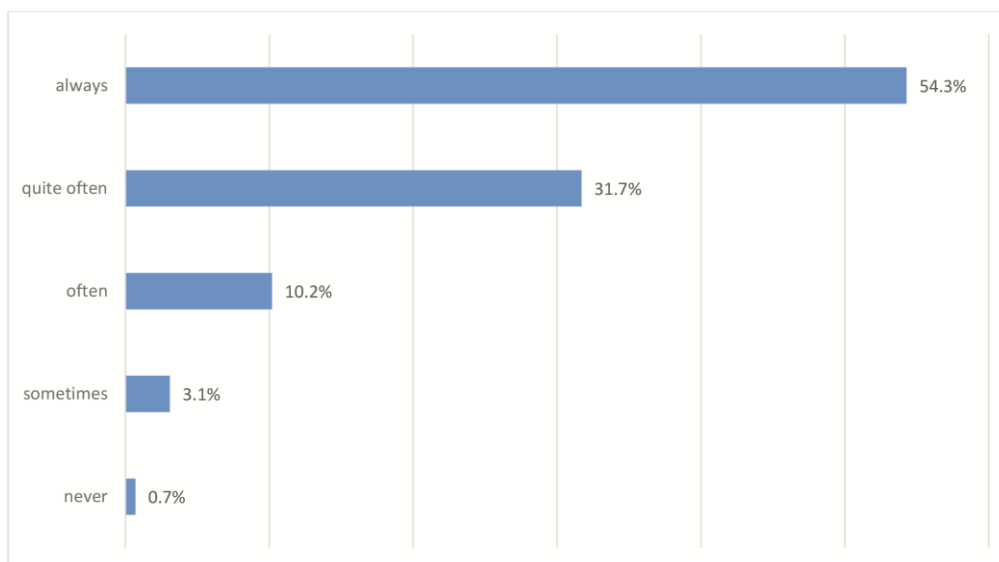
Graph 4. Motricity knowledge can orient special-needs teachers to design motricity lessons inclusively (data expressed as a percentage of the total amount of respondents)

Numerous studies have already revealed that teacher attitudes are crucial to successful inclusivity (Robinson, 2017; Sharma, Nuttal, 2014). Attitudes favourable to including students with disabilities at school are obviously fundamental even within motricity-teaching contexts and are directly proportional to the amount of knowledge and degree of awareness the teachers themselves have gained of disability (Papadopoulou et al., 2004; Tripp, Rizzo, 2006).

Another positive correlation (0.60) has enabled us to deduce that “future special-needs teachers believe motricity practices can help improve motricity competences” (Graph 5-a) and that “designing a motricity lesson can improve the future special-needs teacher’s competences”(Graph 5-b).



Graph 5a). Improve motor, cognitive and social competencies in future special-needs teachers thanks to motricity practices.



Graph 5b) Universal Design for a more inclusive educational context (data expressed as a percentage of the total amount of respondents)

As regards this last datum, it is important to reassert that some international research (Dyson, Casey, 2012) shows that the adoption of specific motricity adjustment practices at school can help teachers acquire more knowledge and confidence to meet the needs of students with disabilities. In addition, motricity and sports practices can help teachers set up strong bonds between special-needs students and the outer world: social relations becoming closer and closer over time provide the teacher with a more solid individual basis for personality development and socialization, which would increase the student's self-confidence and self-esteem.

4. Conclusions and Prospects

Designing inclusivity-based action in motricity education means distancing ourselves from all those practices which are still organized according to the old deficit-based epistemology. In fact, the philosophy of inclusivity entails internalizing the notion of disability as stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (ONU, 2006), whereby the problem is not the disabled or what they can or cannot do, but the institution, specifically the school and its structural, social and environmental barriers, the solution or dismantlement of which could make student inclusion possible.

Thus, following the UNO Convention's guidelines, it is not people that have to be included, but processes, spaces, actions, timetables, methods that have to be designed inclusively (Medeghini, Vadalà, Fornasa, & Nuzzo, 2013; Valenti, 2019). This leads us to believe that a universal design perspective mandatorily entrusts schools to support and encourage change in knowledge by anticipating the creation of an accessible and flexible curriculum. School is no longer based on standard hard and fast programs to be standardized, but on student diversity to be valorized through a flexible and motivating educational environment.

We should never stop pointing out that the UDL approach is based on curricular co-designing, i.e. on building up some sort of cooperation between teachers, with a view to sharing educational ideas, expectations, teaching methods and work tools and setting up relations based on mutual confidence and respect.

Therefore, the objective we have set out to achieve is considering designing an inclusivity-based process with moments of co-building, co-planning and co-assessing according to the principles of Universal Design for Learning and Praxeology.

Thus, the aim of the present unfinished work is laying the foundations for a possible dialogue- and participation-based approach characterized by our want and need to carry on researching, hopefully experimenting with the integrated inclusive model on a broader reference sample and widening its scope to include other universities in Italy and, later on, abroad as well.

Even though various Italian schools have already experimented with inclusivity-based educational processes, our intention to produce inclusive action through an integrated approach originates from the various questions on the possible articulation of this new line of research in Italian school praxis.

Designing motricity education routes according to an integrated paradigm as described in the present work could be a further and longer step forward for Italian schools, as well as an important cultural challenge and (hopefully) achievement in the general sense.

Finally, considering that participation to motricity and the teaching of it is each and every one's right, it is only fair to give it a highly-inclusive role in education today.

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