

THE TRAINING OF TRAINERS OF THE SPECIALIZATION COURSE IN SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS. THE TURIN EXPERIENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY COURSE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CUAP) “EXPERT IN THE PROCESSES OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION”

LA FORMAZIONE DEI FORMATORI DEL CORSO DI SPECIALIZZAZIONE SUL SOSTEGNO. L’ESPERIENZA TORINESE DEL CORSO CORSO UNIVERSITARIO DI AGGIORNAMENTO PROFESSIONALE (CUAP) “ESPERTO NEI PROCESSI DI INCLUSIONE SCOLASTICA”

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Abstract

The article illustrates the elements characterizing the University Course of Professional Development (CUAP) “Expert in the processes of inclusive education” held in the academic year 2020-2021 at the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences of the University of Turin, in response to the need to promote the development of the competences of teachers with a university qualification in special educational needs through the enhancement of their trainers' competences, with particular reference to those in charge of the laboratory activities of the specialization courses.

L’articolo illustra gli elementi caratterizzanti il Corso Universitario di Aggiornamento Professionale (CUAP) “Esperto nei processi di inclusione scolastica” realizzato nell’anno accademico 2020-2021 presso il Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell’Educazione dell’Università di Torino, in risposta al bisogno di promuovere lo sviluppo delle competenze dei docenti specializzati sul sostegno attraverso il potenziamento delle competenze dei loro formatori, con particolare riferimento ai formatori impegnati nelle attività laboratoriali dei corsi di specializzazione.

¹ Introduction: A. Monchietto; Par. 1-2: P. Damiani; Par. 3: N. Curto; Conclusions: CM Marchisio

Key Words

CUAP; experts; inclusion; training; Embedded Model; UN Convention; Human rights paradigm;

CUAP; esperti; inclusione; formazione; Modello incorporato; Convenzione ONU; paradigma dei diritti umani;

Introduction

The training of teachers with a university qualification in special educational needs for students with disabilities has become, in recent years, a major commitment to which Italian universities are called upon. The chronic shortage of specialized in-service teachers in schools is linked to a series of structural causes that will not be discussed here. The phenomenon is well known not only to insiders, but also to the families of students with disabilities, who every year suffer the fatigue and uncertainty of seeing a key role for the inclusion of their children in school often covered by untrained and precarious staff. Therefore, social partners and civil society are demanding that the university increase the number of trainees. The university, thus, finds itself in a dynamic tension between increasing the number of those admitted to the course and preserving the quality of training. The structure of the course, established by the Ministerial Decree of September 30, 2011, provides that a substantial part of the course should be carried out through laboratory activities; these activities, in order to be effective, require a small group work, which allows the participants to gain experience and take active part in the course. The laboratories deal with highly specific topics, for which there are few qualified teachers: therefore, the lack of trainers for those laboratories is one of the obstacles to the enlargement of the pool of trainees. Considering this and thanks to the support and funding of the Piedmont Region, the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences of the University of Turin activated a University Course of Professional Development (CUAP) “Expert in the processes of inclusive education” for the academic year 2020-2021, aimed precisely at prospective laboratory teachers.

The course was activated in light of an inter-institutional Memorandum of Understanding for the promotion of inclusive culture in Piedmont signed by the University of Turin, the Piedmont Region, the Regional School Office for Piedmont, the Metropolitan City of Turin, the University of Eastern Piedmont, in collaboration with the Trade Unions representing schoolteachers CISL, CGIL and UIL. The signing of the Protocol was a very important step: in the spirit of mutual cooperation, the parties committed themselves to coordinating with one another- according to a model of inclusive and sustainable society - through “shared systemic actions”, aimed at promoting inclusive culture with training courses and specific focus. This second-level training action (the so-called training of trainers) was proposed in accordance with the national indications of the Ministry of Education on the subject of training of teaching staff. In fact, in the latest national plans for the training of school personnel, actions aimed at “facilitators” (tutors, coordinators, referents, etc.) have been privileged, with the strategic objective of creating a network of people to foster a more widespread and continuous training action within schools. These individuals, in the above-mentioned memorandum of understanding, have been called “inclusion ambassadors”.

The entire process of building the CUAP course was negotiated and discussed with the signatories of the protocol, in particular the strategic choices. Among these we would like to mention here the drafting of the call for admission, whose objective was to make an initial selection by identifying senior figures in all subjects taught through laboratories, from Mathematics education to motor education.

1.The development of the competences² of university professionals: focusing on training

In the context of university courses, the spreading of training activities able to support the acquisition of “non-disciplinary” competences considered strategic to enhance the employability of students (Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson, 2006) and to develop active citizenship skills in young adults is described as one of the emerging challenges in Higher Education systems. The definition of non-disciplinary competences, which includes aspects that relate to personality, attitude, and behaviour rather than technical or formal knowledge (Gopalaswamy, Mahadevan, 2010), encompasses some of the most widespread and formalized constructs both in the literature and in international and national taxonomies (soft skills, transversal skills, key competences, etc.) (Melacarne, op. cit., p. 61). Indeed, the importance of not neglecting personal qualities (character, judgment, efficiency, and understanding of others) in university education has long been highlighted, and the need for personal and soft skills for entering and succeeding in the world of work, with reference to all professions, remains unchanged (Chignoli et al, 2020); however, it is not easy to trace a consistent line of research on methodologies for their development (and evaluation) within higher education systems (Robles, 2012) (Melacarne, ib.). It is clear that the protection of these “other” skills, closely related to the possibility of building a personal life project and, at the same time, the ability to support people who will be part of their working world in the realization of their own (life projects), is even more compelling if referred to the continuous training of professionals and, in particular, of teachers with a university qualification in special needs education and trainers of trainees.

This shift in focus is widely supported by the literature, as the research on the conditions that facilitate the creation of highly inclusive school environments emphasize the importance of investigating not so much students’ diversities or difficulties and their characteristics, but rather teachers’ “attitudes, sentiments towards students with disabilities, and perceived personal competence” (Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011)” (Romano, Petruccioli, Rullo, 2021, p. 189). Ken Robinson affirmed that expert teachers engage, provide tools, have expectations, and create conditions; effective teaching is a process of continuous adaptation, assessment, and response to student engagement and participation, which, as Savia (2015) notes, is closely related to the possibility of creating inclusive contexts through universal design (Bocci, 2021). For this type of teaching, the coexistence of technical and disciplinary competences and personal qualities in professionals is essential. The *new competencies for teaching* (Perrenoud, 1999) are the ones that should guide initial and continuous training; they also contribute to the fight against school failure and develop a sense of citizenship, as well as referring to existing research and emphasizing professionals' reflective practice (Tino, Fedeli, 2015).

Therefore, training approaches are needed that are based on complex and integrated perspectives and logics, capable of considering the multidimensionality of competencies and

² From now on, we will use the term "competences" when referring to the adequacy of knowledge and skills, unless the literature consulted uses the term "competencies".

multiple rationales beyond the technical-disciplinary ones, as also made explicit in the areas of expertise mentioned by the European profile of inclusive teachers (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2014). In educational settings, it is necessary to focus on the conditions and modalities through which “formal and practical knowledge, explicit and tacit knowledge, material and immaterial dimensions, technical devices and discursive-conversational productions that give meaning and social significance to the subjects’ learning are recognized, employed and articulated. Hence, opening up to unprecedented opportunities to rec³over authentic conditions of subjectivity and emancipatory relationship with one’s own working, professional, organizational and life trajectories also become possible” (Fabbri, Bracci, Romano, 2021 p. 73)⁴. The literature in the field has highlighted the importance of “Teacher Thinking” (Perla, 2015; Buitink, 1993; Clark, Lampert, 1986) and the need for participatory approaches that, through the voice of teachers, are able to bring out the specific professional dimensions of their work (Cardarello, Martini, Antonietti, 2009) and for those competent actions, “through the adoption of a reflective disposition that can be outlined as stable functioning, of which the teacher is often unaware” (Sibilio, Zollo, 2021, pp. 38-39).

Among the coherent training models, in addition to those pertaining to the Transformative Learning Theory” centred on the methodologies of adult education in different contexts of life and work (Taylor, Cranton, 2012), some “mixed” method approaches based on a perspective that focuses on action plans (Suchman, 1987) and educational principles (Fabbri, 2007), seem functional to support the development of non-disciplinary competences in complex organizational structures. The unit of analysis is made up of the strategies used by an organization like the university to develop non-disciplinary competences within the curriculum by leveraging patterns of formative actions aimed at organizational development (Gephart, Marsick, 2016) (Melacarne, op. cit.). One variation of this approach, called “Embedded,” is based on the undifferentiation between ways of teaching disciplinary content and ways of teaching cross-curricular skills (Yorke, Knight, 2004) and the focus is on rethinking the curriculum. Non-disciplinary competences are a task that cannot be separated from the processes of acquiring other technical knowledge or skills. From the perspective of students’ learning process, there is no separation between ‘what is learnt’, and ‘how it is learnt’ (Treleaven, Voola, 2008). The focus of this approach is to consider the use of *learner-centred* instructional modes in the classroom rather than designing parallel experiences as promising. (Melacarne, Orefice, Giampaolo, 2018, pp. 182-183). This is a perspective of particular interest for the training of expert teachers in the organization of inclusive contexts, employing lessons and laboratory experiences that go in the direction of redesigning curricula in order to promote personal and non-disciplinary competences, among other things.

2. The CUAP for “the training of trainers as inclusion experts”

In light of the framework outlined, and in view of the structural constraints of the training project characterizing the CUAP, the course designed and implemented by the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences of the University of Turin was based on the premises of the Embedded approach, consistent with the complexity and *simplicity* paradigms (Berthoz, 2009; Sibilio, 2017), in order to foster the integrated development of technical, disciplinary, non-disciplinary and personal – both *emerging* and dynamic – competences, in a mixed classroom context (distance and face-to-face).

⁴ Our translation

The essential training dimensions around which the CUAP was articulated also constitute the aims of the course itself: building a positive relational environment and support/enhancement of emotional-relational skills and well-being of professionals as essential aspects for the professional development of inclusive teachers, in addition to the strengthening of knowledge and competences of a technical (communication, collaboration, co-design) and disciplinary (inclusive teaching, scientific-cultural insights) nature.

The competence areas related to the core values described in the European profile (valuing students' diversity; supporting all students; working in a team; personally cultivating one's own professional lifelong learning) were supervised both during lessons and seminars - encouraging reflexivity, the *Thinking Teacher* approach, the mediation of meanings and the co-construction of knowledge - and through the participation in laboratory and cooperative experiences centred on the reorganization of curricula and learning contexts.

The training project developed oversees and enhances both non-disciplinary and disciplinary dimensions of an explicit type, focused on the strengthening of cultural, organizational, cooperative and strategic awareness (building a community of inclusion experts through the organization of spaces, times, relationships, materiality and the structuring of interventions of counselling, modelling, tutoring and intervision for the exchange and enhancement of knowledge and practices) and of an implicit type, focused on the enhancement of emotional-relational and body dynamics (perception, feeling, empathy, recognition, trust, mirroring, compassion).

Particular attention was paid to the enhancement of the sense of self-efficacy resulting from peer support and exchange, as an element that correlates positively with the special needs teachers' performances in terms of both commitment and achievement of success and, consequently, with the increase in satisfaction related to their professional role (Sharma et al., 2012; Aiello et al., 2019; Fiorucci, 2019).

Among the strengths that characterize this approach, we observe some aspects of methodology, recognized in the literature as aspects that promote learning and change:

- interdisciplinarity (everyone is trained on everything, regardless of their disciplinary and teaching field. This favours the enhancement of knowledge – with particular reference to inclusive teaching strategies – and the perception of self-efficacy);
- inter-professionalism (participation of different professionals: educators, psychologists, teachers, administrators, managers; attention to use a clear and shared language; updated and specialized technical and disciplinary insights, even during the final teamwork effort, in cooperative and emotionally engaging group settings);
- multidimensionality and globality (enhancement of mind and body; reflective and creative activation in hybrid spaces and times, in presence and distance, indoors and outdoors; blended modalities)
- care (accompaniment and sharing; experience of a safe base to overcome feelings of loneliness, disorientation, judgment, competition, powerlessness; cooperative and proactive reflection; sharing, kindness, altruism, trust).

3. The participants' perspective

At the end of the University Course of Professional Development, a first careful monitoring was provided, in which the course and the chosen training approach were evaluated through the administration of a short questionnaire to the participants.

The survey was carried out with the aim of detecting the perceived level of quality (scrupulously considering the motivations and perceptions of the participants, as well as the objectives achieved and the areas that in the trainees' opinion need to be further developed). At the same time, it also aimed to highlight the principles, contents, approaches, and methodologies identified by the trainees as essential for the construction of an "inclusive" curriculum based on key competences.

A strong distinctive element is the possibility of combining – in an integrated way – the evaluations carried out by those directly involved as well as the actions (coherent and functional to the inclusive paradigm) deemed necessary to facilitate the rethinking of teaching.

3.1 Participants' profiles

Out of 49 course participants, 33 replied to the questionnaire. From the profile that emerges from the information collected, the trainees are professionals in an intermediate or advanced stage of their careers, with an average age of 45 years. There is, however, a consistent heterogeneity in terms of age in the group because the youngest student is 30 years old and the oldest is 63.

In terms of occupation, most of the trainees (78%) were generic or special needs teachers. The remaining part of the group was composed of professionals with a managerial or senior profile (school managers, psychotherapists, pedagogists for about 6%) or professionals working in the school world as educators or communication assistants (9%).

65% of those working in the school are employed in upper secondary school while 35% are employed in lower secondary school.

The educational profile of the class is very high: most of the trainees have more than one university-level qualifications: only 18% have only one.

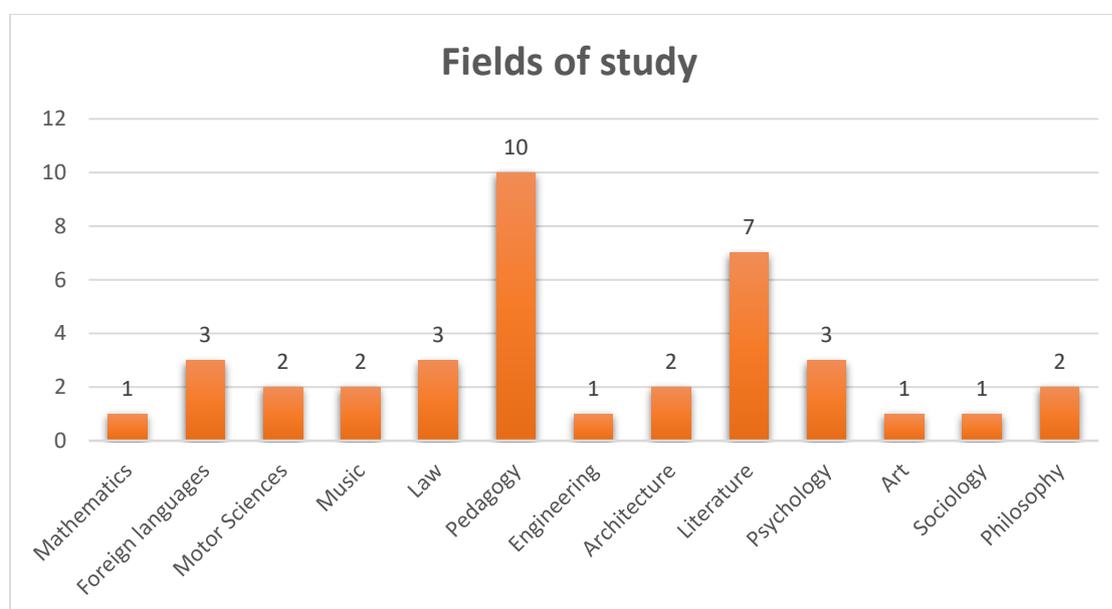
Almost half of the trainees, probably due to their age, hold a master's degree from the previous system (48%) as their highest qualification. 36% have a master's degree or a single-cycle master's degree and 18% have also obtained a PhD. Only 3% of trainees have a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification. In addition to high levels of university qualifications, there is also a substantial percentage of professionals in the group of trainees who already have specific postgraduate training in teaching and inclusion. In fact, 82% of the trainees has already obtained a postgraduate degree at the time of enrolment. Among these, 48% have a university qualification in special needs while 2% have a specialization in TFA, FIT and PAS⁵. It is

⁵ Post-graduate courses to obtain the qualification of secondary education teacher in a given subject by the Italian state

interesting to point out that 27% of the students have gained, in addition to their degree, both specializations.

Already at the beginning of the course we found ourselves, as we had hoped, facing a classroom with a high level of university preparation, in which 20% of the students had more than 4 university qualifications. This aspect undoubtedly influenced the expectations of the trainees and made it necessary to plan teaching in order for it to be not only of high quality but also consistently characterized by innovation and coherence with the most recent models, to avoid the risk of repeating educational paths and topics that are already part of the participants' cultural and professional background.

However, if the group was relatively homogeneous with regard to the level of training, as far as the disciplinary sectors are concerned, the classroom appeared to be characterized by broad interdisciplinarity. In fact, although the most frequent degree is in Pedagogical Sciences, there are 13 different fields of study in the group of 33 respondents.



In the planning phase of the CUAP course, thus, the characteristic of heterogeneity of the classroom represented a further challenge. If, on the one hand, the inter- and transdisciplinary dimension has been increasingly emerging in recent years as a characteristic of training in the field of inclusion, on the other hand, in the training context, different backgrounds translate into different epistemological models, different languages and learning styles and expectations. Therefore, juxtaposing professionals with different training in a classroom does not seem to be enough: in order to create real transdisciplinarity, it is necessary to choose professionals proactively to make them a strong point of the course, harmonize them in a common culture, and prevent the worsening of fragmentation and the consolidation of mutual stereotypes. Finally, to complete the trainees' profile, it is important to emphasize that, in addition to the already mentioned university degrees, 19 out of 33 had further studied the issues of inclusion through specialization courses or diplomas, training and refresher courses, or other CUAP courses.

3.2. Inclusion training

From an initial survey of the trainees' opinions collected at the end of the course, it clearly emerges that the element considered most crucial for inclusion are the strategies of inclusive teaching. From this point of view, in various areas of support throughout one's life project, the results are consistent with those found after the approval of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Indeed, if from the point of view of values and theoretical orientation many share the view that the welfare paradigm is outdated and that psychopedagogical practices must be oriented towards full inclusion and accompaniment to citizenship, from the operational point of view there are still widespread difficulties in translating this orientation into daily practice. To put it in simple words: it is clear to everyone that inclusion *must happen*, but few have a clear idea of how to *make it happen*.

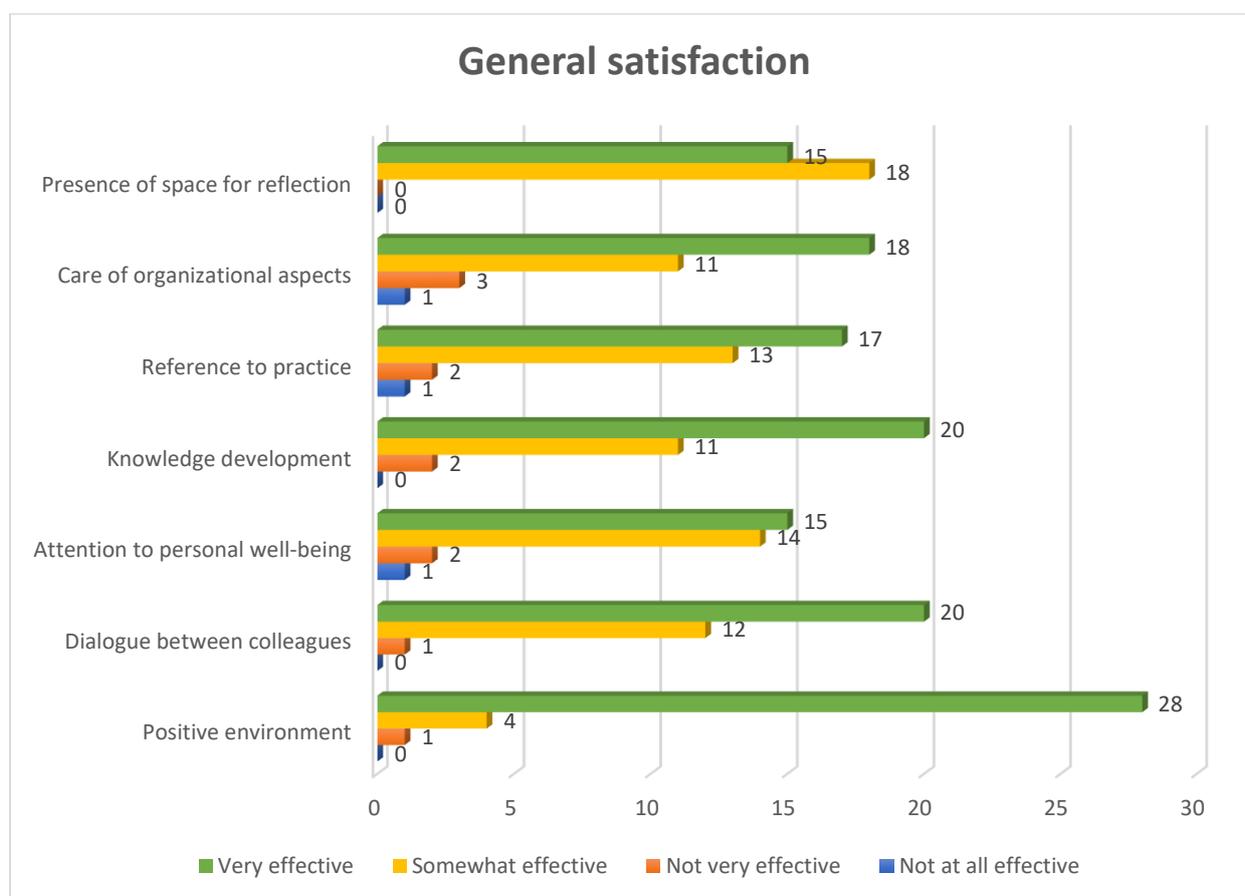


As shown in Figure 2, therefore:

1. **inclusive teaching techniques** are in top position as far as the inclusive teacher's expertise is concerned,
2. **contextual dimensions also appear to be very important: the teacher's relational skills, the regulatory context, the analysis and the accessibility of environments (both material and immaterial) constitute a large part of the elements indicated by the trainees as relevant for an effective training of inclusion professionals.**

This reveals a progressive acquisition of the UN Convention paradigm and of the operational approaches connected to it, where the dimension of working in context is emphasized when the framework for inclusive paths is outlined.

In relation to the training needs identified, 45% of the trainees felt that they were completely satisfied by the CUAP course and 51% indicated that they were partially satisfied. **Only 3% felt their training needs had not been met.**



3.3. Opinions on CUAP

The graph in Fig. X shows the satisfaction levels **for those aspects of the course which, during the planning stage, were treated with particular care by organizers**, consistently with the framework outlined in the previous paragraph.

1. As can be seen in the figure above, the element that was deemed most satisfying is the **creation of a positive environment**. Even in the open-ended responses, the trainees emphasize how this was an element that particularly favoured their learning: the environment is defined by the trainees as *“informal, positive and proactive and future-oriented”, “welcoming”, “serene in a mature learning environment”, “collaborative”, “proactive and enthusiastic”*. This relational work, according to the trainees, “made it possible to feel good throughout the course” but it also increased the effectiveness of learning itself and fostered the development of professional relationships and sharing (another particularly appreciated aspect which we will further discuss below). Several trainees reported this aspect, not only among the most positive elements, but also in the area of the unexpected, highlighting how in their experience it had been unusual to find such an environment in training courses.

2. The **dialogue between colleagues**, favoured by the training structure of the course, is the second most appreciated aspect: the importance of being part of a community of experts, the sharing of knowledge and the formation of a network that allowed participants to get to know

and talk to each other constituted a key element that has, as some students emphasize, even transcended the end of the training course, remaining a reference point even afterwards. This aspect is considered by many to be the greatest added value of the CUAP course attended when compared to previous training experiences.

As a particularly positive element, although it was not present in the questionnaire's response options 3., some also underlined the **systematic character through which the inclusion dimensions were addressed, often in a critical way**. This dimension encompassed both the regulatory framework and the connection to the organizational level, seemingly allowing participants to contextualize the approaches 4. and the methodologies presented. **In this sense, the connection between inclusive education and life project also met with particular interest.**

Conclusions

The training approach adopted, as seen in the previous paragraphs, pays particular attention to the professional applicability of the competences acquired, consistently with the Embedded model. In this sense, the purpose of overseeing the development of personal and social competences considered essential for inclusive teachers was recognized by the trainees.

The personal development of the tutors and the development of social competences - considered to be essential aspects for the inclusive teacher - were pursued through the organization of lessons, workshops, and curricular and transversal activities. This organization was articulated in such a way that it reflected the principles of inclusiveness in terms of both method and content. This commitment was acknowledged by the students both as an element of effectiveness of the course and as a protective factor towards the physiologically stressful elements (for example, online lessons or the concomitance of lessons and heavy teaching load). Furthermore, the trainees acknowledged the significance and effectiveness of the actions and reflections on inclusive teaching, especially as they were aimed at developing professionalism. In this sense, the emotional and communicative dimensions were given equal importance to the technical-educational ones. The aspect of sharing and awareness was highlighted by all participants as essential for the development of a professionalism consistent with the promotion of inclusion; the creation of inclusion networks seems to be the most effective tool.

The CUAP course "Expert in the processes of inclusive education" carried out in the academic year 2020-2021 has shown that it is possible to use the tools available to the University to enhance teacher training on inclusive education. This offers the opportunity to respond to the new challenges the Italian school is about to face. If, in fact, in 2006, with the approval of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Italian school was at an advantage compared to other European countries, as it was already characterized by a strong inclusive motivation, today the evolution of the legislation calls the system to new challenges. In December 2021, in fact, the *Legge Delega al Governo per la disabilità* (Law delegating the government in matters of disability) was approved, which provides for a reform of services for adults with disabilities. This outlines a new scenario for the students of the future, who will be part of a world where they will have the opportunity to be full citizens. In the new universe of services that will be implemented in the coming years, students with disabilities will no longer be assigned to special centres or places but will be able to live in the real world, as the UN Convention states, "on an equal basis with others". This new perspective calls on schools to face renewed challenges and invests inclusion – and the professionals who promote it – with even more complex tasks; among others, the possibility of training tutors to accompany

teachers in meeting these challenges appears to be crucial. Once again, as in the past, the school is called upon to be the primary driver of social inclusion for people with disabilities.

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