

**PROFESSIONAL SELF AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DISABILITY:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN
CURRICULAR AND SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHERS**

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Abstract - The aim of this investigation was the exploration of social attitudes towards disability (assessed with open-ended items), expressed by 45 curricular and 45 special needs teachers, in relation to the representation of Professional Self and disabled and typically developed students (analyzed using semantic differential: De Caroli et al., 2007). Results showed that, about the future goals of disabled students, especially curricular teachers indicated the attainment of higher education and the achievement of social integration, on the contrary special needs teachers stated the acquisition of personal autonomy. About the emotions expressed by teachers, especially curricular teachers assumed that they have negative feelings towards disabled students, while special needs teachers expressed positive feelings. The representation of Professional Self was significantly more positive than that expressed toward disabled and typically developed students: this result was more relevant in special needs teachers than curricular colleagues. The representations of Professional Self and disabled students were more positive in teachers expressing positive feelings towards disabled students compared to teachers expressing negative feelings. It will be interesting to verify the influence of positive representation of professional role on the perception of disabled subjects in other caretakers involved in the management of disability.

Keywords: disability, Professional Self, social attitudes, special needs teachers

Introduction

The literature concerning the analysis of the attitudes expressed by teachers towards students with disabilities and their inclusion has indicated that special needs teachers expressed more positive attitudes toward these students (Cornoldi *et al.*, 1998; Vianello *et al.*, 1999) and inclusive education (Pedrabissi and Balboni, 2000) because of direct and prolonged contact than those expressed by curricular colleagues. Compared with teachers attending to specialized courses on disability, special needs teachers appeared more likely to adopt innovative teaching techniques and showed more attention to inclusive education of disabled students (Besio and China, 1997). In addition, Buell *et al.* (1999) found that special education teachers' perception of their efficacy in serving students in inclusive settings, their ability to positively affect students, their understanding of inclusion, and the availability of supports to promote inclusion were higher than that expressed by general education teachers.

In addition to experience of contact, also age and years of teaching affected on social attitudes expressed by teachers. Cornoldi *et al.* (1998) found that younger teachers and those with fewer years of teaching to disabled students expressed more favourable attitudes toward students with disabilities and their integration than older ones; Parasuram (2006) showed that age, education level, years of teaching, knowledge of disabled people, membership in families with a disabled person, and the experience of contact with people with disabilities affected positively on social attitudes expressed by teachers towards disability; specifically, knowledge of a disabled person had a positive impact on the willingness to the inclusion of people with disabilities in regular schools rather than segregation in special schools. Furthermore, Nichols and Sosnowsky (2002) found that younger people seemed more stressed for the discrepancy between the effort expended in the work and the progress expected in the disabled person, as well as in the studies of Gersten *et al.* (2001) and Billingsley (2004). These studies showed that younger teachers and those with fewer years of teaching were frequently prone to change their career or even change the type of job.

Recently, De Caroli and Sagone (2008) have explored in a group of special needs teachers in training, social attitudes towards scholastic integration of disabled students, levels of *burnout*, interpersonal adaptation and the representation of Professional Self, Students with disabilities and Colleagues. The results showed that: the majority of special needs teachers expressed positive attitudes towards disability and integration of students with disabilities; a reduced part of teachers felt feelings of inadequacy towards their professional role, showing attitudes characterized by detachment and hostility to the stressful situation, co-workers, and disabled students; in a small percentage of special needs teachers, there has been an emptying of emotional resources and a low self-efficacy in relation to success in their profession. About the interpersonal adaptation, a significant concern regarding the social image, attitudes of closure and avoidance of stressful situations, a lack of impulsivity, and a reduced stress in social situations were found. The authors also found that the representation of Professional Self was more positive than those expressed for the curricular colleagues and, especially, for students with disabilities (characterized by many elements of “weakness”) in teachers who showed low levels of emotional exhaustion, non-affirmativeness, impulsivity and high levels of personal fulfilment.

Special needs teachers who assessed themselves as competent and professional skilled tended to evaluate more positively the progresses of disabled students (Miller *et al.*, 1999) and experienced lower levels of stress (Singh and Billingsley, 1996) compared to teachers who perceived themselves less competent. In this direction, what has been considered particularly critical concerned the feeling of satisfaction expressed by teachers engaged in special education programs (Stempien and Loeb, 2002), supported both by the social recognition of the profession and by the direct relationship with disabled and typical developed students.

In school context, specifically, the perceived self-efficacy is related to confidence in personal ability to have effects on the performance of students having difficulties in the learning process (Guskey and Passaro, 1994) and to the severity of children’s needs (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000). Teachers who experienced high levels of professional self-efficacy tended to engage more productively in their work (Coladarci, 1992), to adopt more innovative teaching strategies and more effective methods of classroom management (Woolfolk *et al.*, 1990; Fuchs *et al.*, 1992), acting also on academic performance of students (Multon *et al.*, 1991).

An element that tends to characterize negatively the teaching profession with disabled students (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998), with the consequences that affect on the same users, is the risk of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). This syndrome, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal fulfilment, hits, primarily, persons engaged in traditional helping professions and it is present in special needs teachers who pursue their teaching with students with different disabilities (Chaplain, 1995; Manthei and Solman, 1996; Upton and Varma, 1996).

In elementary and middle school teachers, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) found that emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were related to job satisfaction; further, all three dimension of burnout were differently related to the school context variables (supervisory support, time pressure, relations to parents, and autonomy), in the sense that emotional exhaustion was strongly related to time pressure whereas depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment were strongly related to teachers’ relations with parents.

The framework offered by the scientific literature in relation to social attitudes expressed by teachers towards disabled students and Professional Self seemed particularly complex and in need of further deepening.

2. Objectives of study

The objectives of this contribution were focused on the exploration of social attitudes towards disability and the representation of Professional Self, Students with disabilities and Students with typical development in two groups of curricular and special needs teachers.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 90 teachers, 45 curricular (18 men, 27 women) and 45 special needs teachers (9 men, 36 women), aged between 24 and 64 years ($M=45,2$, $SD=9,2$) serving for a period of training equal to $M=17,02$, $SD=10,1$ in some middle schools in Catania.

3.2. Materials and procedures

The materials were constituted by background questions, useful to define the characteristics of teachers, and open-response items referred to the future goals achievable by disabled students, their individual characteristics, and emotions expressed to them and three Semantic Differentials (De Caroli *et al.*, 2007) used to investigate the representation of Professional Self (I as a teacher, $\alpha=.89$), Students with disabilities ($\alpha=.91$) and Students with typical development ($\alpha=.86$); each of the three concepts was composed of a set of 36 pairs of bipolar adjectives assessed on a 7-points scale. It has been possible to measure the following Euclidean distance:

1) DSELDISAB - the distance of semantic space between Professional Self and Students with disabilities; 2) DSELFTYP - the distance of semantic space between Professional Self and Students with typical development; 3) DISABTYP - the distance of semantic space between Students with disabilities and Students with typical development.

We carried out content analysis of open-response items in a small group setting, identifying the following core concepts: in relation to future goals (achieving of high education, social integration, acquisition of personal autonomy and job), to individual characteristics (person like the others, affectionate and sensitive person, isolated and marginalized person, in need of care) and in relation to emotions (positive and negative empathy).

3.3. Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were carried out using the following tests by means of SPSS 15 software: t *Student* and Chi Square Test.

4. Results

The results showed that the achievement of social integration was considered by over 50% of sample one of future goals achievable by disabled students, followed by the acquisition of personal autonomy (23,3%). In relation to the differences between the two groups of teachers ($\chi^2=9,20$, g.l. 3, $p=.027$), it was noted that a higher percentage of

curricular teachers indicated the achievement of high education (72,7%) and of social integration (57,8%), while a higher percentage of special needs teachers indicated the acquisition of personal autonomy (76,2%) (Table I).

Tab.I – Future goals – Differences for type of group					
Content		Percentage	Type of group		Total
			Special needs teachers	Curricular teachers	
future goals	high education	Count	3	8	11
		% within future goals	27,3%	72,7%	100%
		%	3,3%	8,9%	12,2%
	social integration	Count	19	26	45
		% within future goals	42,2%	57,8%	100%
		%	21,1%	28,9%	50%
	job	Count	7	6	13
		% within future goals	53,8%	46,2%	100%
		%	7,8%	6,7%	14,4%
	personal autonomy	Count	16	5	21
		% within future goals	76,2%	23,8%	100%
		%	17,8%	5,6%	23,3%
Total		Count	45	45	90
		%	50%	50%	100%

No differences between curricular and special needs teachers in the allocation of individual characteristics ($\text{Chi}^2=4,37$, $p=.224$) were obtained, in the sense that, for both groups, students with disabilities were considered overall people like others (26,7%) and affectionate and sensitive persons (42,2%). A very small percentage of teachers believed that disabled people are isolated and marginalized (12,2%) and in need of care (18,9%).

With reference to the emotions (Table II), 76,7% of the sample expressed positive feelings, while 23,3% negative feelings; especially, 46,7% of special needs teachers vs. 30% of curricular teachers expressed positive feelings, while 20% of curricular teachers vs. 3,3% of special needs teachers negative feelings ($\text{Chi}^2=13,97$, $p<.001$).

Tab.II – Emotions – Differences for type of group					
Content		Percentage	Type of group		Total
			Special needs teachers	Curricular teachers	
emotions	positive empathy	Count	42	27	69
		% within emotions	60,9%	39,1%	100%
		%	46,7%	30%	76,7%
	negative empathy	Count	3	18	21
		% within emotions	14,3%	85,7%	100%
		%	3,3%	20%	23,3%
Total		Count	45	45	90
		% within emotions	50%	50%	100%

The representation of Professional Self was significantly ($F=134,59$, $p<.001$) more positive ($M=5,29$, $SD=,64$) and above the intermediate point (one test: $t=19,11$, $p<.001$), than that expressed in relation to Students with disabilities ($M=4,21$, $SD=,62$; one test: $t=3,22$, $p=.002$) and Students with typical development ($M=4,16$, $SD=,55$; one test: $t=2,82$, $p=.006$). Specifically, the representation of Professional Self seemed to be more positive in special needs teachers compared to their curricular colleagues ($M=5,43$ vs. $M=5,15$, $t=2,09$, $p=.039$).

Regarding Euclidean distances, the distance between Professional Self and Students with disabilities ($M=2,09$, $SD=,56$) was greater than the distance between Professional Self and Students with typical development ($M=2,01$, $SD=,52$) and, overall, the distance between Students with disabilities and those with typical development ($M=1,75$, $SD=,52$). Significant differences for the two groups of teachers in the distance between Professional Self and Students with disabilities were found: special needs teachers expressed greater distance between these two dimensions than their curricular colleagues ($M=2,21$ vs. $M=1,97$, $t=2,09$, $p=.039$).

From the intersection between the semantic core of emotions (positive and negative empathy) and the representation of Professional Self and Students with disabilities (Tab.III) it was possible to note that curricular teachers who referred positive emotions showed a more positive representation of Self in the role of teacher; at the same time, curricular teachers who referred positive emotions showed a more positive representation of Students with disabilities.

Tab.III – Comparison between emotions and semantic differentials – Curricular teachers					
Semantic differentials	Content of emotions	M	SD	Anova	Sig.
Prof Self	positive empathy	5,35	,55	7,82	.008
	negative empathy	4,85	,64		
Students with typical development	positive empathy	4,12	,61	1,06	ns
	negative empathy	4,12	,30		
Students with disabilities	positive empathy	4,54	,53	16,06	<.001
	negative empathy	3,94	,44		
Scala from 1 to 7 intervals					

4. Conclusions

This contribution has shown that curricular teachers, more than special needs ones, referred that future goals for students with disabilities consisted of achievement of high education and social integration while special needs teachers, more than curricular colleagues, indicated the acquisition of personal autonomy. Moreover, with regard to emotions, special needs teachers expressed more positive feelings than their curricular colleagues.

The Professional Self representation was more positive than that expressed for disabled and typically developed students and this result was found particularly in special needs teachers. Furthermore, the Euclidean distance between Professional Self and Students with disabilities was greater than the distance between Students with disabilities and those with typical development; this datum was referred to special needs teachers.

This evidence was in line with the findings in a survey previously carried out by De Caroli *et al.* (2007), in which it was found that, in special needs teachers serving in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, the representation of disabled students was perceived less positively than that of students with typical development and Professional Self: if, on the one hand, these teachers evaluated themselves in a positive way, on the other hand, they perceived negatively the users of their professional job, that is, students with disabilities.

In future research it will be interesting to verify the positive impact of the representation of professional role on the perception of users expressed by other professionals involved in the management of disability.

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