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ABSTRACT

The aim of this contribution will be to analyse the teaching actions of the support teacher. The basic idea is to analyse all the support teacher's tasks. By means of a pilot project, an attempt was made to ascertain whether it is possible to summarise these tasks of the teacher in a few cornerstones, which together presumably lead to full inclusive teaching action and thus to maximum efficiency for the purpose of the concepts of inclusion and integration.

Obiettivo del contributo sarà quello di analizzare l'agire didattico del docente di sostegno. L'idea di base è analizzare tutte le mansioni del docente di sostegno. Attraverso un progetto pilota si è cercato di verificare se sia possibile riassumere tali mansioni del docente in alcuni punti cardine, che nell'insieme portano presumibilmente ad un pieno agire didattico inclusivo e quindi alla massima efficienza al fine dei concetti di inclusione ed integrazione.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive teaching, support teacher, disability.
Didattica inclusiva, insegnante di sostegno, disabilità.

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Introduction

In the context of the complex relationship between the world of disabilities and the educational system, the theme of inclusive didactics acquires a central and inescapable importance. At the heart of this concept lies the figure of the support teacher, a professional who plays a pivotal role in the realization of educational inclusion within the school environment. Despite the centrality of this figure and the significant expectations placed upon it, the actual didactic actions undertaken by support teachers often appear to be underestimated or insufficiently recognized within school dynamics, even though their functions and responsibilities are clearly and thoroughly regulated by the Italian legal framework, most notably by Law no. 104 of 5 February 1992, an essential reference point that defines the rights, assistance, and paths to social integration for differently-abled individuals.

This apparent underestimation may stem from a deeper issue, a lack of complete awareness and understanding on the part of the support teachers themselves regarding the scope and complexity of their role. Despite operating within a context defined by precise and binding regulations, many support teachers still seem to navigate their responsibilities with partial clarity, often focusing primarily on operational aspects while neglecting the more strategic and planning dimensions of inclusive education. This observation calls for a broader reflection on teacher training and on the school system's capacity to promote an inclusive culture, not only in principle but in everyday practice.

Literature on the topic, both national and international, appears to converge on a number of fundamental themes, consistently highlighting the key elements necessary for the development of an effective inclusive educational model. Among these, particular attention is devoted to the clarity and specificity of didactic objectives, the implementation of diversified and flexible methodological strategies, and the development of teachers' professional competencies (Calvani A., 2018). These aspects form the pillars of inclusive didactics and are considered essential for promoting real participation and success for all students, including those with special educational needs.

Instructional design is one of the most emphasized dimensions in this regard. The capacity to design educational paths that are truly inclusive requires a clear vision, coherent planning, and constant adaptation to the real needs of students. Moreover, it presupposes the ability to integrate cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions within the teaching process, recognizing that learning does not occur in a vacuum, but is influenced by the student's emotional well-being and sense of belonging to the school community.

In this sense, the support teacher's role should not be limited to the management of individual cases or the reduction of learning barriers for a single student, but should extend to a broader function of coordination and mediation within the school team, actively collaborating with curricular teachers, school leadership, and families to foster a truly inclusive school environment. As lanes (2022) suggests, the quality of inclusive teaching depends largely on the ability to establish meaningful educational relationships and on the intentionality of every pedagogical act. It is therefore essential that support teachers are not seen as external agents or mere assistants, but as integral and proactive parts of the educational system.

Another particularly relevant theme concerns teacher training. Many scholars (Angelini C., et al., 2022) underline the importance of providing future support teachers with not only disciplinary and didactic knowledge, but also with relational, communicative, and organizational competencies. This broad skill set is necessary to manage the complexity of inclusive processes and to interact effectively with the various actors involved in the educational experience of students with disabilities. Moreover, continuous professional development, through workshops, supervision, reflective practices, and peer discussion, is considered crucial for maintaining high levels of professional competence and motivation over time.

The adoption of truly inclusive teaching strategies also emerges as a recurrent focus in current pedagogical discourse. Authors such as Baldassarre and Sasanelli (2021) emphasize the need to move beyond compensatory interventions, proposing instead models of universal design for learning (UDL) that allow all students to access knowledge through multiple pathways. In this context, the idea of "special" teaching for "special" students is overcome in favor of a vision in which diversity is seen as a resource and an opportunity for educational innovation.

Despite the growing number of studies and theoretical contributions on inclusive didactics, the specific focus on the didactic actions of support teachers remains relatively limited in the scientific literature. This constitutes a significant gap in the research landscape, particularly considering the key role that these teachers play in the implementation of inclusive practices. It is within this context that the present research project is situated, aiming to provide an in-depth and systematic analysis of the professional and didactic practices of support teachers operating within the school system.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to investigate more thoroughly the nature, structure, and dynamics of the didactic actions undertaken by support teachers in daily educational settings. Starting from a thorough review of the main literature on the subject, the project intends to explore all the dimensions that revolve around the figure of the support teacher, reconstructing the inclusive and

didactic trajectory that characterizes their intervention. This includes, but is not limited to, the planning phase, the choice of teaching methodologies, the interaction with other teachers and students, and the evaluation processes.

The research project represents the continuation and expansion of a pilot study previously conducted on the same topic (cf. previous research), which employed a descriptive survey method. In that preliminary phase, a structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of student teachers enrolled in the specialization course for support teaching activities (TFA) at the University of Naples "Parthenope." The encouraging results obtained during the pilot phase revealed a rich and complex picture of the perceptions, practices, and challenges faced by support teachers-in-training. They also confirmed the need to deepen our understanding of how inclusive didactics is concretely translated into classroom practice, and how support teachers perceive and interpret their educational mandate.

Building on this initial framework, the present study will broaden the scope of the investigation, incorporating a larger sample and refining the research tools to capture more nuanced and context-specific information. Special attention will be devoted to identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder effective didactic action, as well as to understanding the levels of awareness and training among support teachers with respect to their regulatory and pedagogical framework. The final aim is to formulate proposals and recommendations that can contribute to the improvement of initial and ongoing training pathways for support teachers, as well as to the development of more coherent and integrated inclusive policies at the school level.

In conclusion, the challenge of inclusive education cannot be addressed without a serious and committed investment in the professional development and recognition of support teachers. Their role, far from being marginal or auxiliary, constitutes a cornerstone of the inclusive school. Through this research, we hope to shed light on the real practices, perceptions, and needs of these professionals, contributing to the broader goal of building a school that is truly for all.

1. Literature Review

The sources consulted and used for this project were basically divided into three distinct macro-areas: preliminary, primary and secondary sources. Among the preliminary sources, numerous websites were reviewed that focus on inclusive didactics with reference to the figure of the support teacher. On the whole, these sources tend to repeat as widely cited in the introduction, definition, objectives, aims and strategies, for inclusive didactics

(<https://didatticapersuasiva.com/didattica/che-cosa-si-intende-perdidactics-inclusive>). Still among these sources, the concepts of collective didactic planning (<https://www.universoscuola.it/cos-e-la-didattica-inclusiva-definizione-obiettivi-strategie>) and the work to be carried out on the social and emotional area in the presence of pupils belonging to the area of special educational needs (<https://fieradidacta.indire.it/it/blog/didattica-inclusiva/didattica-inclusiva>) are abundantly repeated. Lastly, and not by order of importance, these sites included the main official sites of the Ministry of Education and Research (<https://www.miur.gov.it>) and several publishing houses particularly active about inclusion and didactics (<https://www.ericson.it/insegnante-di-sostegno>). Among the secondary sources consulted were mainly manuals and texts on inclusive didactics that deal in synthesis with aspects purely related to instructional design (Buccolo M., et al., 2022), the assessment of pupils in the Bes area (Manzo G., 2022), inclusive teaching strategies and workshops (De Piano A., 2018). Primary sources. The review of these sources led to the consultation of the main and most recent (last five years) studies about inclusive teaching from the perspective of the support teacher. Relevant are the contributions about support teacher training, both from the point of view of specialising courses (Angelini C., et al., 2022), and from the point of view of the skills acquired following training itself (Domenicini G., et al., 2022). In the wake of this contribution, the observation of the “inclusive teacher” is also notable (De Angelis M., 2021) also in relation to the use of information and communication technologies (Isidori M.V., Cicaci A.M., 2021). Other strands of investigation instead take up, as already mentioned for preliminary and secondary sources, teaching strategies for inclusion such as Universal Design for Learning (Baldassarre M., Sasanelli L., 2021) and peer tutoring strategies (Schiri F., 2019).

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

The research conducted falls within the scope of descriptive research, a methodological approach aimed at offering a detailed and systematic account of a given phenomenon. In this specific context, the phenomenon under investigation is the didactic action of support teachers within the framework of inclusive education. The primary methodological tool chosen for this purpose was the questionnaire, a widely used instrument in social, educational research due to its ability to gather standardized, comparable, scalable data.

The guiding research question, formulated as a hypothesis to be tested, was intentionally simple yet significant: "Do support teachers design and implement their teaching actions in accordance with current regulations?" This hypothesis arises from the broader aim of exploring whether the theoretical, legislative framework that governs inclusive education in Italy, particularly as established by Law 104/1992, is being reflected in the daily professional practices of support teachers.

In operational terms, the research sought to analyze the entire spectrum of didactic steps typically undertaken by a support teacher, from the initial reception of a student with disabilities, to the systematic observation of the student's behavior, learning potential, and finally to the design of personalized learning units that respond to the specific needs, capabilities of each learner. The descriptive nature of this study allows for the exploration of how these steps are actually interpreted, applied in real educational settings by those in training, those already practicing.

Before full administration, the questionnaire underwent a validation, revision phase, which will be detailed in the following sections. This helped ensure the instrument's reliability, clarity, and alignment with the objectives of the study.

2.2 Participants

The research was conducted in two distinct phases, involving two groups of participants with different profiles, both crucial to the validation and administration of the questionnaire.

In the first phase, a preliminary version of the questionnaire was submitted to a pilot group of ten in-service support teachers. These individuals, aged between 35 and 60, were all tenured professionals working in secondary schools. The sample was gender-balanced, consisting of five male, five female participants. Their role was to evaluate the questionnaire's content, structure, and relevance to the actual teaching context. Their feedback was essential for refining the wording of the items, ensuring that the proposed questions were both understandable, reflective of the realities of support teaching. The insights gathered during this phase led to several modifications that improved the internal coherence, face validity of the instrument (Scamardella F., 2023).

In the second phase, the finalized questionnaire was administered to a larger, more structured sample composed of 90 student-teachers enrolled in the specialization course for support teaching activities (TFA) at the University of Naples "Parthenope". This group represents a population currently in the process of becoming support teachers and therefore provides a significant perspective on

how inclusive didactics is understood, internalized during training. The sample was perfectly balanced in terms of gender, with 45 male, 45 female participants, and had an average age of 45 years, suggesting a mature group with a likely prior professional or educational background. This characteristic adds value to the data collected, as the participants are not only theoretically informed but also potentially experienced in educational environments.

This dual-participant structure, consisting of both practicing, aspiring support teachers, allowed for a broader, more nuanced understanding of the teaching actions associated with inclusive education.

2.3 Measures

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed around a Likert scale, a tool particularly effective for measuring attitudes, perceptions, degrees of agreement or disagreement on specific statements. In this study, the Likert scale provided five response options: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*.

The questionnaire consisted of six carefully formulated items, each aimed at investigating a specific dimension of the support teacher's role within inclusive didactics. The items were designed to assess whether the teaching practices align with the regulatory framework, pedagogical principles underpinning inclusive education in Italy. Below is a detailed breakdown of the items, their corresponding focus areas:

1. Reception and Integration Strategies

Item: "The support teacher has the task of implementing reception, integration strategies for the pupil/children with disabilities."

Objective: To evaluate the teacher's involvement in the initial stages of student inclusion, their role in facilitating a welcoming school environment.

2. Analysis of Certification Documents

Item: "The support teacher has the task of consulting the pupil/children's certification for the purpose of future educational planning."

Objective: To verify the extent to which support teachers base their planning on official diagnoses, reports, a fundamental regulatory requirement.

3. Systematic Observation

Item: "The support teacher has the task of implementing systematic observation processes for the purpose of future educational planning."

Objective: To assess the role of observational techniques in tailoring the educational approach to each student's unique needs.

4. Participation in the Operational Working Group (GLO, OWG)

Item: "The support teacher takes part in the GLO, which has the task of drawing up, approving the individualized educational plan (PEI)."

Objective: To analyze the teacher's participation in collaborative, interdisciplinary planning, a core element of inclusive strategies.

5. Selection of Methodologies, Strategies

Item: "The support teacher has the task of choosing the appropriate strategies, methodologies, depending on the residual abilities, potential of the pupil with disabilities."

Objective: To explore whether instructional design reflects differentiated, personalized teaching principles.

6. Didactic Planning of Learning Units (LU)

Item: "The support teacher has the task of taking part in the didactic planning of learning units, according to the objectives of the IEP, for inclusion."

Objective: To verify the involvement of support teachers in broader curriculum planning, beyond the mere assistance of the individual student.

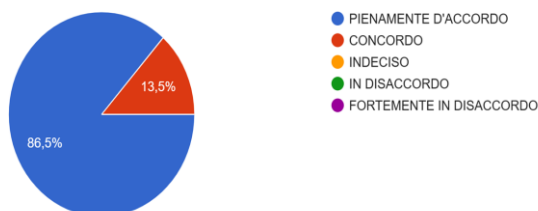
These items collectively capture the essential didactic steps of support teachers, reflecting the theoretical principles promoted by both legislation, pedagogical literature. The use of a Likert scale allows for quantitative analysis of qualitative judgments, offering a way to interpret both individual trends, collective patterns in perceptions, practices related to inclusive education.

3. Results

So as far as the results are concerned, we first review the statistical indexes relating to the answers taken from the sample and then move on to a discussion of the data itself. To question number one, the support teacher has the task of implementing reception and inclusion strategies for the student with disabilities, 86.5% of the interviewees fully agree, followed by 13.5% who agree. No undecided, disagree or strongly disagree.

1. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO HA IL COMPITO DI METTERE IN ATTO STRATEGIE DI ACCOGLIENZA ED INSERIMENTO PER L'ALUNNO/A PORTATORE DI DISABILITA'.

89 risposte



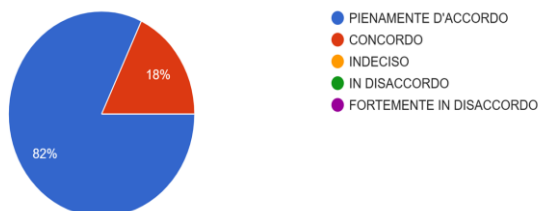
Graph. 1 (Item nr° 1)

(fully agree, agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

For question number two, the support teacher has the task of consulting the student's certification for the purpose of future teaching planning, 82% fully agreement, 18% agree with the starting statement. Also in this case, no one is undecided, disagrees or strongly disagrees.

2. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO HA IL COMPITO DI CONSULTARE LA CERTIFICAZIONE DELL'ALUNNO/A AL FINE DELLA FUTURA PROGETTAZIONE DIDATTICA.

89 risposte



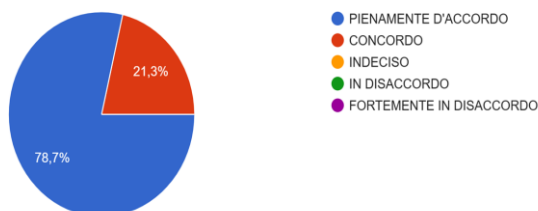
Graph. 2 (Item nr° 2)

(fully agree, agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

In the third question, support teacher has the task of implementing systematic observation processes for the purpose of future teaching planning, 78.7% fully agree, while 21.3% of the sample agree. Once again there are no undecided, disagree or strongly disagree.

3. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO HA IL COMPITO DI METTERE IN ATTO PROCESSI DI OSSERVAZIONE SISTEMATICA AL FINE DELLA FUTURA PROGETTAZIONE DIDATTICA.

89 risposte



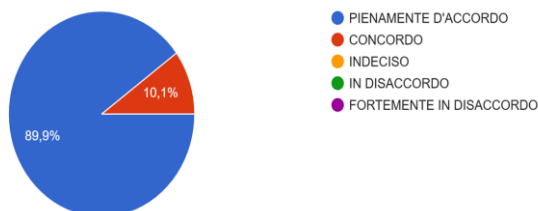
Graph. 3 (Item nr° 3)

(fully agree, agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

For question number four, the support teacher takes part in the GLO, which has the task of carrying out the development and approval of the individualized educational plan (PEI), 89.9% of the sample fully agrees, while the remaining 10.1% agree. None of the interviewees is undecided, disagrees or strongly disagrees.

4. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO PRENDE PARTE AL GRUPPO DI LAVORO OPERATIVO PER L'INCLUSIONE(G.L.O.), CHE HA IL COMPITO DI ELABORARE IL PIANO EDUCATIVO INDIVIDUALIZZATO(PEI).

89 risposte



Graph. 4 (Item nr° 4)

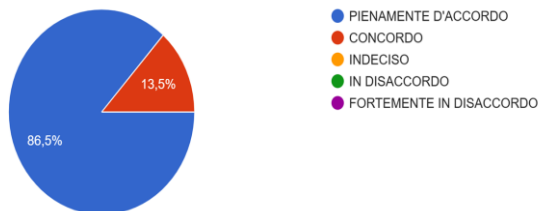
(fully agree, agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

As regards question five, the support teacher has the task of choosing the appropriate strategies and methodologies, based on the abilities and residual potential of the disabled student, 86.5% of the interviewees fully agree, 13.5%

agree with the starting statement. Once again there are no undecided, disagree or strongly disagree.

5. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO HA IL COMPITO DI SCEGLIERE LE OPPORTUNE STRATEGIE E METODOLOGIE DIDATTICHE, IN FUNZIONE DELLE A...UE DELL'ALUNNO/A PORTATORE DI DISABILITA'.

89 risposte



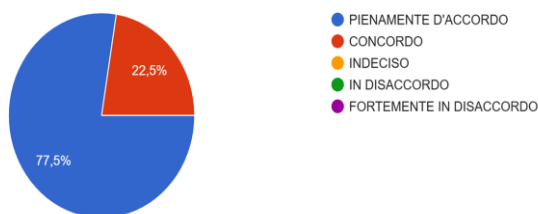
Graph. 5 (Item nr° 5)

(fully agree , agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

Finally, regarding the last question number six, the support teacher has the task of taking part in the didactic planning of learning units (U.D.A.), according to the objectives of the PEI and for the purpose of inclusion, 77.5% of the sample fully agrees with the initial statement, while another 22.5% agrees. The trend continues where no interviewee is undecided, disagrees or strongly disagrees.

6. IL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO HA IL COMPITO DI PRENDERE PARTE ALLA PROGETTAZIONE DIDATTICA DI UNITA' DI APPRENDIMENTO(U.D.A.),...BIETTIVI DEL PEI ED AL FINE DELL'INCLUSIONE.

89 risposte



Graph. 6 (Item nr° 6)

(fully agree , agree, indecisive, at odds, strongly disagreeing)

4. Discussion

As regards question number one, the data tell us that the entire sample (100%), as previously highlighted, fully agrees or agrees with the starting statement; this could imply that the support teacher is identified as the main figure in the creation and activation of the right strategies for the reception and insertion of all the pupils belonging to the area of special educational needs and specifically for those with disabilities. This data also implies, considering the type of sample, a particularly high degree of awareness of this factor regarding the figure of the support teacher. Again, this result seems to be perfectly consistent with the starting hypotheses and in particular with the reference legislation (Ministerial Note no. 4274 of 4 August 2009, Guidelines for the scholastic integration of pupils with disabilities), which is the theoretical framework of this contribution.

Proceeding in a similar way with regard to the question number two, also in this case almost the entire sample (100%) fully agrees/agrees with the basic statement. Specifically, the sample agrees that it is necessary for the support teacher to consult the pupil's certification. This brings us to some considerations. The first is that viewing the certification allows the support teacher to understand from the outset, even if in general terms, what the pupil's residual abilities and potential will be, on which to base future teaching activities. The second consideration is the possibility of sharing such reflections and information with the entire class council, always with a view to the future methodological and disciplinary choice. Again, this result, as for the previous item, seems to be perfectly in line with the starting hypotheses and in this case with the theoretical framework of reference (Ministerial Circular 6 March 2013, no. 8, Intervention tools for pupils with special educational needs). Also, for question number three the trend of the previous items continues; 100% fully agree/agree with the proposed statement. Specifically, the sample agrees with the possibility of implementing systematic observation processes with regard to the pupil with disabilities. This data leads us first of all to the deduction that before any didactic planning (as highlighted in the same item) it is good practice to observe, possibly according to the dimensions already present in the various individualised educational plans (Law n. 104 of 5 February 1992, Law - framework for assistance, social integration and the rights of disabled people). Moreover, these data seem to be apparently consistent on the one hand with the starting hypothesis and on the other hand with other elements mentioned in the theoretical framework in question (Inter-ministerial Decree no. 182 of 29 December 2020, Adoption of the national model of the individualised educational plan and related guidelines). In the fourth item the majority trend continues with 100% of respondents fully agreeing/agreeing with the starting

statement. Specifically, the majority of the sample agrees with participation in the (OWG) GLO, which implements and approves the pupil's future IEP. All this apparently implies awareness on the part of the interviewees, of that feeling of "co-responsibility" and sharing effectively expressed in the Miur Notes of 4/8/2009: "It is the entire school community that is to be educated in the process in question and not only a specific professional figure to whom the task of integration is to be entrusted exclusively". Also, in this case the data seem pertinent to the starting hypotheses and also in line with the theoretical framework considered, reinforcing what is foreseen by the Legislative Decree of 13 April 2017, n. 66, "Rules for the promotion of the scholastic inclusion of students with disabilities". As far as question number five is concerned, 100% of the respondents fully agree/agree with the starting statement. More specifically, the majority of the sample agreed with the fact that the support teacher has the task of choosing the appropriate teaching strategies and methodologies according to the potential of the disabled pupil. This fact implies in almost all the sample that it is the support teacher who chooses, researches and finds the right way, the right approach, suitable to the pupil's needs according to what has been previously analysed and observed. Everything is still apparently pertinent and consistent with the starting hypotheses and once again in line with the basic theoretical framework (Ministerial Note 4 August 2009, no. 4274, Guidelines for the school integration of pupils with disabilities). Even on the last item the entire sample (100%) fully agrees/agrees. In particular in this question, the sample agrees with the fact that the support teacher has the task of taking part in the didactic planning of Learning Units, according to the IEP. This data would seem to imply, in full coherence with the previous items, teamwork for inclusive policies on the one hand, and on the other a co-responsibility with regard to didactic planning that is not entrusted solely to the curricular teachers. It would apparently appear that the support teacher must design UDA for the case being analysed each time, systemising all the work of the previous steps. This datum is strongly consistent and pertinent with the starting hypothesis if correlated also with the other items (majority tendency of the sample) and would result once again perfectly anchored to the theoretical starting point (Ministerial Note 4 August 2009, no. 4274, Guidelines for the school integration of pupils with disabilities).

Conclusions

Generally, studies related to inclusive teaching, from the point of view of the support teacher's actions and the practices entrusted to him, would certainly seem to deserve further investigation, even if the starting hypotheses of this contribution

appear fully confirmed. It is also apparently possible to observe some limits of the present research project. The qualitative limits relating to the sample considered (students - teachers in training not yet structured and established in a role) could appear as a factor that slows down the process of knowledge at the basis of the research. It is also true that such limits can become an opportunity to broaden and deepen the topic considered. The replacement of the sample with tenured support teachers, for example, could lead to further developments on the topic, broadening on the one hand the sample and on the other its quality. It would be interesting to carry out, starting from the same methodological basis, investigations on the figure of the support teacher both in training (TFA) and in role in the various school levels, from primary to secondary school, obviously passing through secondary school, for a broader and more in-depth knowledge, on the role of the support teacher. All this to underline how this pilot project is in development and has in itself notable possibilities for development and expansion, adding a further contribution to the link between inclusive teaching, support teacher and inclusion.

Author contributions

The entire article can be attributed to Fabio Scamardella.

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