



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th - June 1st, 2024
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Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Improving Inclusive Education: the Turin Model of Collaboration between Schools, Universities and Communities

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Abstract

The training course *Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes*, developed by the University of Turin, addresses the growing need for qualified trainers in the *Specialisation Course for Support Activities* (CdS). Grounded in Disability Studies in Education (DSE), the program reframes inclusion as a strength, fostering skills such as cultural awareness, organisational agility, relational expertise, and strategic thinking. Initial evaluations highlight its transformative impact, enabling trainers to inspire future educators to integrate inclusive principles into practice. This initiative exemplifies how targeted professional development advances inclusion, aligning with national and international educational priorities.

Keywords: disability studies in education; support teachers; training of trainers; professional development; inclusive education.

1. Building Capacity for Inclusive Education Through Trainer Development

Inclusive education represents one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for the modern school system. By ensuring the full participation of students with different abilities and needs, inclusive practices promote equal access to quality education and a culture of respect and cooperation (UNESCO, 2017). In Italy, the pursuit of inclusion is deeply rooted in a solid legal framework and a pedagogical tradition that dates back to the 1970s, when the country pioneered the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. This "single option" approach makes inclusion not a marginal issue, but a fundamental principle of education (Pavone, 2010; Cottini, 2014).

At the center of this model is the role of support teachers, professionals who are mandated by law to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities. They work with other teachers to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, have equal access to educational and social opportunities. To become a certified support teacher, candidates must complete the *Specialisation Course for Support Activities* (CdS), a demanding university specialization pathway that includes 1,500 hours (equivalent to 60 ECTS) of theoretical coursework, practical labs, and extensive internships (Calvani *et al.*, 2017; Romano *et al.*, 2021). This rigorous training is essential to equip support teachers with the skills needed to manage the complexity of inclusive education (Bocci, 2018; 2021).

The growing demand for support teachers in Italy poses a double challenge: to meet the quantitative need for more trained professionals without compromising the quality of their preparation. The University of Turin has recognized this and, in collaboration with the Piedmont Region and other local institutions, has launched the *Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes* (CUAP) training course over the last three years. With a focus on training lab instructors and internship tutors for the CdS, the program is designed to enhance the competencies of educators who play a critical role in the preparation of support teachers.

The CUAP course is based on the principles of Disability Studies in Education (Gabel, 2005; Slee *et al.*, 2019; Baglieri, 2023) and provides educators and trainers with both the theoretical framework and the practical tools needed to promote inclusive education. By fostering cultural awareness, relational skills and strategic thinking, the program aims to empower trainers who, in turn, inspire future educators to incorporate inclusive principles into their teaching.

This article describes the theoretical underpinnings, practical methods, and initial outcomes of the program and offers insights into how targeted professional development can drive systemic change. It provides a case study of how local initiatives can be aligned with international standards to promote sustainable and meaningful educational reform. In this way, it aims to contribute to the global discourse on inclusive education.

2. Bridging Theory and Practice: Collaborative Strategies for Inclusive Education

Effective inclusive education is not the result of isolated efforts, but rather the result of coordinated collaboration between different stakeholders. The University of Turin has recognized this and developed a model that focuses on partnerships between universities, schools and local communities. This framework recognizes that the complexity of inclusion cannot be addressed through top-down measures or individual initiatives alone. Instead, a networked system is required in which educators, policy makers and the community work together to create an inclusive learning environment (Alessandrini, 2007).

Central to this collaborative effort is the establishment of local networks that bring together different actors to address the practical challenges of inclusion. These networks operate as hubs for the exchange of resources, expertise and innovative practices. Universities play an important role in these networks as centers for research and advanced knowledge and serve as catalysts for systemic change (Grau *et al.*, 2017).

This emphasis on collaboration is based on the recognition that inclusion is a multi-faceted issue. Effective strategies must consider not only pedagogical practices, but also organizational structures,

cultural perceptions, and community engagement (Ko & Sammons, 2013). For example, creating an inclusive classroom involves more than simply equipping teachers with technical skills; it requires fostering a school culture that values diversity, supports peer collaboration, and promotes equity at all levels of decision-making (EADSNE, 2012). Territorial networks provide a platform to address these broader dimensions and enable stakeholders to work together to develop solutions tailored to the particular needs of their communities (Harkavy, 2006).

The CUAP program is an example of this collaborative ethos. The course was developed as part of an agreement between the University of Turin and key regional and local institutions and reflects a shared commitment to promoting inclusion as a core value (Bianchini *et al.*, 2023). In this agreement, the roles of each partner were formalized to ensure that the program benefited from a broad range of perspectives and resources. Schools contributed their practical insights into the challenges of inclusion, while universities provided the theoretical framework needed to address these challenges. Local governments facilitated the integration of these efforts into broader regional policies and ensured alignment with national and international standards.

The collaboration also extends to the course participants themselves, who bring a wealth of professional experience to the program. Through mutual learning and shared reflection, participants contribute to a dynamic learning environment that bridges the gap between theory and practice. Through this interplay of knowledge and experience, the program not only prepares educators to meet the demands of inclusive education, but also fosters a community of practice committed to continuous improvement (Gibson *et al.*, 2016).

By incorporating collaboration into its design, the CUAP program closes a critical gap in traditional teacher education: the gap between pedagogical theory and the practical reality of the classroom. This integrated approach ensures that participants are not only prepared to implement inclusive practices, but are also able to adapt these practices to the changing needs of their students and communities. It emphasizes the principle that inclusion is not a static goal, but a dynamic process that requires constant dialog, innovation and collaborative effort.

3. Theoretical Foundations and Structure of the CUAP Program

The *Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes* program draws its strength from a solid theoretical foundation rooted in Disability Studies in Education (DSE). This paradigm challenges traditional deficit-oriented approaches to disability by advocating for a perspective that views diversity as an asset rather than a limitation (Naraian, 2017). At the heart of the DSE framework is the belief that inclusion is not just about accommodating students with disabilities, but reshaping educational systems to celebrate and leverage differences as a source of collective enrichment (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). By adopting this perspective, the CUAP program equips educators with the mindset and tools to foster a truly inclusive environment.

At the core of the CUAP curriculum is a commitment to align pedagogical practices with the principles of DSE. The program introduces participants to a range of theoretical models and methodologies and encourages them to critically engage with existing paradigms and explore innovative approaches to inclusion. For example, the course challenges participants to reconsider conventional notions of ability and success and to shift the focus from standardized outcomes to individual learning and growth pathways. These theoretical foundations enable educators to navigate the complexities of diverse classrooms with confidence and creativity.

The structure of the CUAP program is designed to translate these theoretical insights into practical competencies. Following a Competency-Based Education and Training model (Burke, 2005), the course combines theoretical instruction with practical learning experiences. A distinctive feature of the CUAP program is its emphasis on experiential learning. Participants take part in workshops, collaborative projects and internships that give them the opportunity to apply what they have learned in authentic contexts. As we will see below, the program includes a critical incident analysis component in which participants examine real-life scenarios that occur in inclusive classrooms. This

exercise not only sharpens their problem-solving and analytical skills, but also deepens their understanding of the relational dynamics that underlie effective inclusive practice.

Another important aspect of the program is its focus on interdisciplinary collaboration. Recognizing that inclusion requires a holistic approach, the CUAP curriculum incorporates insights from fields such as psychology, sociology and organizational leadership. This interdisciplinary perspective provides participants with a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence inclusion, from the individual needs of learners to broader systemic and cultural considerations.

The program also places a strong emphasis on developing strategic competencies. Participants are trained to design and implement inclusion strategies that are both contextual and scalable. This is not just about addressing immediate challenges in the classroom, but also about contributing to the broader transformation of school culture and policy (Gephart & Marsick, 2016). By fostering strategic thinking, the CUAP program prepares educators to act as change agents in their institutions and communities (Brown *et al.*, 2023; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2015).

Through its integration of theory, practice and collaboration, the CUAP program is an example of a forward-looking approach to teacher training. It not only equips participants with the skills they need to meet the challenges of inclusive education, but also inspires them to advocate for more equitable and inclusive education system.

4. Critical Reflection as a Core Pedagogical Tool

A cornerstone of the CUAP program is the emphasis on critical reflection as a tool for professional growth. Inclusive education, with its inherent complexities and dynamic challenges, requires educators to move beyond prescriptive methods and engage deeply with the nuances of their practice. By fostering critical reflection, the CUAP program equips participants to interrogate their assumptions, analyze their experiences, and adapt their approaches to meet the diverse needs of their students and communities.

Central to this reflective process is the use of the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), a methodological tool that is integrated into several modules of the program. This technique encourages participants to examine significant events in their professional practice, whether these are moments of success, conflict or unexpected outcomes. For example, participants are asked to identify incidents from their own teaching experience. These incidents are then analyzed in a collaborative setting where participants discuss the underlying factors, explore alternative responses and identify the competencies mobilized to address the situation.

The value of this approach lies in its ability to combine theory and practice. By analyzing real-life scenarios, participants gain a deeper understanding of how inclusive principles operate in complex educational contexts. This reflective practice also fosters a sense of shared learning as participants share insights and strategies from their diverse experiences. Such discussions often uncover systemic challenges – such as cultural biases or institutional barriers – that may not be apparent at first glance, but are critical to effective inclusion implementation.

The reflective components of the CUAP program not only promote individual growth, but also impact professional practice. Participants are encouraged to document their reflections and share them with colleagues. This process not only broadens the scope of their insights, but also contributes to the development of a reflective culture in their schools and organizations. By exemplifying reflective practice, CUAP participants inspire their colleagues to adopt similar approaches, creating a domino effect that improves the overall quality of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the reflective framework chosen by the CUAP program aligns with the principles of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), which emphasize the importance of challenging existing perspectives and adopting new ways of thinking. Participants are guided to critically examine how societal norms, institutional policies and personal biases influence their understanding of inclusion. This process ensures that participants internalize the principles of reflective practice and are able to maintain this mindset beyond the duration of the course (Naraian, 2017).

An illustrative example of the impact of the program is the reflective exercises that focus on the role of support teachers in the Italian model of inclusive education. Participants often begin the course with a narrow view of their role, seeing it primarily as a means of providing individualized support to students with disabilities. Through critical reflection, however, they recognize the broader dimensions of their work, including their responsibility to foster collaboration among colleagues, advocate for systemic change, and contribute to the creation of an inclusive school culture.

By encouraging participants to think critically about their experiences, the program prepares them to navigate the complexities of inclusive education with adaptability, empathy and strategic understanding. This approach not only strengthens their individual competencies, but also contributes to the overarching goal of building resilient and reflective educational communities.

5. Conclusions

Initial evaluations of the CUAP program underscore its transformative potential. Participants have reported that they have developed a deeper understanding of the principles of inclusion, moving from seeing diversity as a challenge to appreciating its value as foundational principles (Damiani *et al.*, 2021). The program's focus on reflective practice has allowed educators to critically question their assumptions, adapt to the complex dynamics of the classroom, and develop innovative strategies to promote collaboration and equity. This shift in perspective is evident in the participants' ability to implement inclusive practices that extend beyond the individual classroom and influence whole school culture and policy.

One of the most promising outcomes of the program is its multiplier effect. By focusing on the professional development of trainers, the CUAP course ensures that the principles of inclusion are incorporated into the training of future educators. Participants have reported gaining more confidence in guiding prospective teachers, facilitating workshops, and mentoring colleagues, creating a cascading effect that extends well beyond the immediate cohort of the program (Di Masi *et al.*, 2023).

Impact evaluations have also highlighted the success of the program in addressing systemic challenges. For example, participants have found that they are better able to overcome institutional barriers and advocate for inclusive policies in their schools. The collaborative networks created through the program have fostered a sense of shared responsibility for inclusion and enabled educators to draw on collective expertise and resources (Damiani *et al.*, 2021).

The CUAP program's early achievements underscore the importance of investing in targeted professional development to drive systemic change. By prioritizing the training of trainers, the program has demonstrated that sustainable inclusion requires not only individual competencies, but also the creation of supportive ecosystems in which educators can collaborate, innovate, and thrive (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). This holistic approach ensures that inclusion is not treated as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as a flexible, adaptable process that responds to the changing needs of diverse learners and communities.

As the program continues to evolve, further research and evaluation will be critical to refine its methods and expand its reach. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the lasting impact of the CUAP program on participants' professional trajectories and on the educational outcomes of the students they serve. In addition, expanding the program to other contexts could help disseminate its principles and practices, contributing to the global discourse on inclusive education.

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