



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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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

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# **Problematic behaviors and classroom management. Teachers' representations**

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## **Abstract**

The current school system faces numerous challenges, including a growing difficulty among teaching staff in effectively educating and engaging new generations. Research highlights how many students struggle to acknowledge the school's educational and formative role. These challenges often manifest as delays, dropout, or school interruption, as well as in overt expressions of discomfort, ranging from aggressive behaviors to a broader and more hidden sense of juvenile malaise. Within this evolving context, it is crucial to examine how teachers' perceptions and representations shape their approaches to managing student behavior deemed inappropriate. To investigate this issue, an exploratory survey was conducted to understand the implicit constructs that influence teachers' thinking and, consequently, their daily practices in interpreting and addressing inappropriate behaviors among students across various school levels.

**Keywords:** problematic behaviours at school; classroom management; Inclusion; teacher's role; educational challenges.

## 1. Problematic behavior in the classroom between old and new educational challenges

Among the terms most commonly employed to examine today's educational and school contexts, "complexity" appears to be the most fitting word to capture a reality that, over time, has faced significant challenges, reshaping traditional models and frameworks.

This growing complexity is deeply rooted in the profound cultural, social, and organizational shifts that have redefined the landscape of education over the past few decades. From a cultural perspective, the globalization of knowledge and the increasing interconnection between different societies have significantly influenced the values, priorities, and expectations placed upon educational systems. The rise of digital technologies has not only transformed how knowledge is accessed and shared but has also redefined what it means to be an educated individual in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Schools, once primarily focused on transmitting knowledge, are now tasked with cultivating critical thinking, adaptability, and intercultural competencies—skills that are essential in a rapidly changing, globalized world. Therefore, it can be stated that nowadays the paradigm of "complexity" can be taken as the key to better understand the reality of schools, overwhelmed by a plurality of challenges, which have become increasingly complex over time. Specifically, many studies (d'Alonzo, Monauni, 2021; Tomlinson, 2016; Tomlinson, Murphy 2015) highlight, as part of the daily experience of many teachers, the perception of an increasing difficulty in building an appropriate educational context for learning.

The roots of this perception can be traced to several interrelated factors. Firstly, there has been a significant improvement in the ability to identify and diagnose specific learning difficulties and other challenges at an earlier stage. Advances in psychological, pedagogical, and medical research, coupled with the increased availability of assessment tools, have allowed educators and specialists to detect issues such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and other conditions more effectively.

However, this focus on diagnostics also highlights the increasing diversity of student needs within classrooms. Modern schools are now microcosms of broader societal complexities, reflecting a wide range of cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. Migration, globalization, and the ever-changing societal landscape have brought together students with varied linguistic skills, cultural traditions, and value systems. For instance, students from immigrant families may face language barriers or cultural adjustment challenges, while others may struggle with socio-economic difficulties, family instability, or trauma. These factors create a plurality of needs that require nuanced and flexible approaches to teaching and classroom management.

Moreover, another notable aspect, particularly within the Italian educational system, is the specificity of its teacher recruitment process. In Italy, it is possible to temporarily assume a teaching role even in the absence of specific pedagogical training. This lack of mandatory pre-service preparation significantly complicates the effective management of critical situations in the classroom. Teachers often find themselves unprepared to address the diverse and complex needs of their students, which can amplify challenges related to problematic behaviors or learning difficulties. The absence of a solid foundational training in pedagogy, classroom management, and inclusive practices means that many educators are left to navigate these issues through trial and error, which may inadvertently exacerbate the challenges faced by both students and teachers.

Despite advancements in identifying and supporting diagnosed difficulties, there appears to be a parallel rise in behaviors that are deemed problematic but fall outside the scope of formal diagnostic categories (DSM 5-TR, 2022). These kinds of reactions, often described in psycho-pedagogical literature as "problematic," include issues such as persistent

disengagement, oppositional behavior, bullying, or classroom disruptions. Unlike diagnosed conditions, these attitudes are not necessarily rooted in neurological or developmental disorders but are influenced by a complex interplay of environmental, social, and psychological factors.

These situations give rise to significant challenges for educators, who are tasked with addressing a wide spectrum of needs while maintaining an inclusive and functional learning environment. Traditional behavior management approaches, such as punitive measures or zero-tolerance policies, are increasingly recognized as insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive. Instead, there is a growing emphasis on adopting restorative practices, fostering emotional regulation, and building strong teacher-student relationships to address the root causes of problematic behaviors.

To address these challenges effectively, it is crucial to identify educational approaches and strategies that are both innovative and reflective of the evolving societal context. Such strategies must not only respond to the complexities of modern classrooms but also prioritize the cultivation of meaningful, high-quality teacher-student relationships, which are fundamental to any learning process.

Fostering these relationships requires educators to embrace practices that emphasize empathy, active listening, and mutual respect, creating an environment where students feel supported and understood. At the same time, leveraging contemporary methodologies, such as social-emotional learning frameworks and culturally responsive teaching, can empower educators to navigate the diversity and difficulties of their classrooms with confidence and care. By focusing on the relational foundation of education, schools can better equip students to overcome challenges and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

Furthermore, it may be useful to frame the issue of problematic behaviors within broader theoretical constructs such as ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which emphasizes the multiple, interacting layers of influence on student behavior. Likewise, contributions from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1995) offer valuable perspectives on the emotional and relational dimensions of behavior in school settings.

## **2. The role of representations in teacher's daily work**

In analyzing the factors that contribute to understanding and managing classroom complexity, alongside the construct of individual and professional well-being, it becomes increasingly relevant to focus on the role of teachers' representations. These latter, encompassing perceptions, beliefs, and expectations that teachers hold about themselves, their students, and the broader educational context, gradually develop into entrenched mental frameworks. As Bandura (1997) suggests, these mental frameworks play a pivotal role in shaping teaching practices and influencing the overall effectiveness of both teaching and learning. The dynamics underlying the construct of social representation serve as crucial elements for analysis and discussion to better understand how certain school practices develop.

Social representations, as shared systems of beliefs, values, and norms that are collectively constructed and individually internalized, shape how teachers perceive and approach their educational environment. These representations influence not only how teachers interpret their roles and responsibilities but also how they engage with students, colleagues, and the broader school context. In the educational setting, social representations act as a framework through which teachers make sense of complex situations, guiding their decision-making

processes and shaping their pedagogical choices. For instance, a teacher's representation of what constitutes an "effective" or "inclusive" classroom environment will directly affect how they design learning activities, interact with students, and address challenges.

These representations can also influence the development of implicit biases or stereotypes, which may, in turn, impact the fairness and equity of teaching practices. Analyzing these dynamics provides valuable insights into the mechanisms by which certain practices become established and perpetuated within schools. These considerations are fundamental because they highlight how any attempt to innovate educational proposals or design fully participatory environments must inevitably engage with deeply rooted individual cognitive mechanisms. Teachers' mental models, formed through years of personal and professional experiences, cultural influences, and institutional norms, shape their perceptions of teaching and learning. These cognitive frameworks serve as a lens through which educators interpret new ideas, assess their feasibility, and decide whether and how to implement them in their classrooms. Specifically, the perceptions and representations that teachers hold play a pivotal role in shaping how they manage problematic behaviors in the classroom.

Teachers' perceptions of problematic behaviors often determine the strategies they employ. For example, a teacher who perceives disruptive behavior as a sign of defiance or intentional disrespect may adopt punitive or authoritarian measures to enforce discipline. On the other hand, a teacher who views the same behavior as a manifestation of unmet emotional or social needs may choose to investigate the underlying causes and apply restorative or supportive interventions. These contrasting approaches highlight how underlying representations can significantly influence the effectiveness of behavior management strategies.

There is a further element to be considered within this reflection. The production of new social representations acts as a balancing factor between tradition and innovation, between practices tried and tested in the past and new methodological perspectives, in a perspective of change that is not in total contrast to what has already been consolidated. The introduction of new ideas, devices and working perspectives frequently leads to the temporary destabilization of thoughts sedimented over time. It is therefore important to promote a pedagogical reflection on these issues that can accompany teachers in this process of change, linking innovation to a ground of pedagogical continuity and thus contributing to changing social representations around a given thematic focus.

In this regard, it is crucial for each teacher to be able to have dedicated spaces in which to exercise his or her own reflexive thinking/practice about daily experience in order to combine his or her own perceptions with those of other colleagues working in the same classroom. Structured opportunities, such as peer discussions, mentoring programs, or professional learning communities, can provide teachers with a supportive environment to share experiences, challenge one another's perceptions, and collaboratively develop new strategies. These spaces allow for a critical dialogue that not only facilitates individual growth but also contributes to the collective evolution of teaching practices and social representations within the institution.

In this way, reflexive thinking/practice becomes a tool for navigating the balance between tradition and innovation. It provides a framework for teachers to engage thoughtfully with new ideas, ensuring that they are implemented in a way that is contextually meaningful and pedagogically sound. Furthermore, it supports the development of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017), encouraging educators to view challenges as opportunities for learning and adaptation rather than obstacles to overcome.

### **3. Managing the problematic behaviors: an exploratory survey about teachers' perception and representations**

In the light of the above considerations, it is therefore clear that there is a need to question the role that the teacher assumes in the classroom in terms of posture, ability to manage the group and establish effective educational relationships, in addition to mere didactic and methodological preparation. Especially, in recent years, the topic of problem behavior in the classroom has gained increasing attention, not only within schools but also in academic debates and educational policies. Teachers' difficulties in managing these critical situations are now recognized as a crucial factor that can significantly affect the school climate and the well-being of pupils and educational staff. The demand for classroom management training courses, especially in relation to educational and relational strategies for coping with complex and challenging situations, is also growing steadily, reflecting the pervasiveness of these issues at all levels of the school system.

The perception of what problematic behavior is can vary widely among teachers, depending on personal experiences, cultural expectations and school regulations. Often, this challenging attitude is associated with disruptive outbursts, aggression, rule transgression, or opposition to authority figures such as teachers.

However, there is also a growing recognition that this kind of actions may reflect states of psychological distress, emotional suffering, or implicit demands for attention and care. This ambivalence in the definition and perception of critical behavior implies a significant challenge for educators, who must balance the need to maintain order in the classroom with the goal of supporting students' emotional well-being.

The exploratory survey conducted by the CeDisMa fits into this context. The questionnaire used, structured in 17 multiple-choice items, was designed to detect the participants' perceptions and representations of problem behavior in the school environment. To ensure broad participation and easy accessibility of the tool, the Google Forms platform was used. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify key trends in participants' responses. In addition, qualitative analyses were carried out to examine the open-ended responses and identify emerging themes regarding the definitions of challenging behavior and management strategies adopted by teachers.

The sample consisted of 308 subjects, with a clear majority of female teachers (93.2%). This result reflects a predominantly female representation in the teaching profession, which is consistent with broader trends in education, particularly in early and primary schools, where female educators are historically overrepresented. Moreover, the largest group consists of individuals aged 46-55 years (31.8%), followed closely by those in the 36-45 age range (30.8%). This indicates that most participants belong to mid-career professionals who have substantial teaching experience and are likely to be well-established in their roles. The smallest group is those over 55 years old (15.3%), indicating a lower presence of educators in the late-career phase.

The composition of the sample was homogeneous in terms of age and years of service, while presenting some inhomogeneity in terms of gender and educational qualification. This heterogeneity makes it possible to explore a wide range of perceptions and professional experiences, offering a diversified representation of opinions and educational practices in relation to the management of problematic behavior.

The high percentage of university degree holders (77.3%) also highlights the growing professionalization of the education sector, with formal academic preparation becoming increasingly necessary. In terms of teaching experience, the data indicates a fairly balanced distribution: the largest group (26.6%) consists of teachers with 6-10 years of experience,

suggesting a significant portion of mid-career professionals who have gained knowhow but are still in a phase of professional growth and adaptation. Interestingly, 63.3% of the respondents reported observing more problematic behavior among male students.

The results reveal a number of common perceptions among education professionals. The majority of participants indicated 'rule breaking' as the most frequent problem (101 choices) in managing classroom, followed by 'oppositonality/provocation towards the teacher' and 'violent actions' (60 choices). These kinds of attitudes were also perceived as the most complex to manage and the ones causing the most distress among teachers, who were asked to express their perceptions in relation to certain problematic behaviors by evaluating the three parameters of frequency, complexity and discomfort.

However, significant differences emerged with regard to other types of behavior, such as 'self-harming behavior' (8 choices), which, although less frequent, was rated as extremely complex and a source of considerable distress. With respect to the latter, it is worth emphasizing that 91 teachers expressed great discomfort caused by it. In terms of coping strategies, teachers reported a variety of approaches, including the use of punishments, asking others to intervene, involving the class in collective discussions, and having individual conversations with the pupil to understand the underlying causes of the behavior. Interestingly, there is an emerging preference for non-punitive educational approaches that emphasize dialogue, listening and mutual understanding, rather than the adoption of rigid disciplinary measures. This trend suggests a movement towards a more empathetic and reflective approach to managing problematic behavior that considers the emotional complexity of students.

A key aspect to consider when analyzing classroom dynamics is teachers' perceptions of the underlying factors contributing to arise critical behaviors among students. The data highlights a strong emphasis on emotional and communicative difficulties, suggesting that many behavioral challenges observed in the classroom are rooted in students' struggles with emotional regulation and social interaction. Although the survey cannot be considered representative, also due to a non-probabilistic sample, the data reported initiates an initial interesting reflection on a subject that has become very important over the years, not only in terms of classroom management strategies, but also in terms of the design of learning processes.

These findings align with the theoretical perspective that behavior is often a communicative act, as suggested by psychoeducational models such as those of Fedeli (2020) and Lambruschi & Piro (2024), which highlight the importance of interpreting student behaviors as signals of unmet needs. Similarly, the emphasis on non-punitive strategies echoes the principles of restorative practices and social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020; Burrus, J., Rikoon, S.H., & Brenneman, M.W., 2022), supporting the idea that relational approaches foster a more inclusive classroom climate.

#### **4. Emerging reflections and new horizons**

The survey results, presented in partial form in this contribution, suggest several implications for teacher training. Firstly, the need emerges to develop training programs that go beyond the mere transmission of immediate coping strategies for managing challenging situations and that promote a deeper understanding of the underlying psychological and social dynamics. The ability to critically reflect on one's own educational practices, to share experiences with other teachers and to adopt a flexible and adaptive approach to classroom

management represent fundamental competences that should be at the core of educators' initial and ongoing training.

A crucial element in addressing challenging and problematic behaviors in the classroom is the development of teachers' reflexivity, which allows educators to continuously analyze their perceptions, beliefs, and strategies. Reflexivity is not just a theoretical construct but a practical skill that enables teachers to shift from reactive responses to proactive, student-centered approaches. When teachers engage in reflexive practices, they can better recognize how their own biases, expectations, and emotional responses shape their interactions with students, influencing classroom dynamics and behavioral outcomes. For this purpose, structured opportunities for professional reflection should be incorporated into teacher training, both at the pre-service and in-service levels. Reflective practices, such as peer discussions, and case study analyses, encourage teachers to examine their decision-making processes and consider alternative approaches to managing classroom challenges. Moreover, collaborative learning environments, where teachers can share experiences and insights, contribute to the creation of professional communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) that support continuous learning and adaptation. The concept of the community of practice has been studied in particular by Wenger, Lave, and a group of other scholars who have explored the influence of the social matrix on learning processes and, in general, of learning as a process of social participation. According to these studies, learning cannot be reduced to a purely individual endeavor; rather, it must be understood as a phenomenon that involves a process of co-participation and co-construction of knowledge, in which social dynamics and cognitive processes not only influence each other but also merge in a meaningful way.

This has fundamental implications for identity formation: learning together and thanks to others means modifying oneself, as individuals become part of a collective. Within this collective, one assumes a role, contributes ideas, and simultaneously acquires new skills and adopts different behavioral models that emerge and take shape through meaningful relationships with others (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002).

It is therefore evident how this type of approach can influence the way a group of teachers takes responsibility for and makes decisions following the emergence of problematic behaviors exhibited by students in a classroom.

This article is part of these reflections and also tries to identify possible future research directions. In particular, the data collected show how teachers perceive emotional fragility and communicative difficulties as major contributors to problematic behaviors. This reinforces the need for teacher training programs to integrate reflexivity with emotional intelligence (EI), ensuring that educators are not only aware of their own perceptions and biases but also equipped with the skills to recognize and respond to students' emotional and communicative needs. Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in fostering empathetic, responsive, and inclusive classroom environments, where teachers can de-escalate conflicts, support emotional regulation, and create stronger teacher-student relationships. In addition, the challenge of managing problematic behaviors in the classroom cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. A holistic approach, that integrates reflexivity, emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practices, sociocultural awareness, and technological advancements, is essential. Future research could examine comprehensive training models that combine these elements, assessing their effectiveness in reducing teacher burnout by providing educators with sustainable behavior management strategies; in improving student outcomes, particularly for those with behavioral and emotional difficulties; in enhancing teacher-student relationships, fostering a more inclusive and responsive educational environment.

By continuing to explore these areas, researchers and educators can build a knowledge base that supports teachers in navigating the complexities of modern classrooms, ensuring that training programs remain dynamic, evidence-based, and responsive to the evolving needs of students and educators alike.

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