



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

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

May 29th – June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Planning the transition to adulthood for students with disabilities: knowledge, perceptions, challenges from STrADE teacher training program

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Abstract

The transition to adulthood for students with disabilities is influenced by personal, environmental, and systemic factors, often made more challenging by insufficient support and weak collaboration. This study presents the results of an online qualitative questionnaire administered to support teachers who will attend a training program carried out in the intervention phase of the action research STrADE launched in an upper secondary school in the Bergamo area. Specifically, the paper collects knowledge, perceptions, challenges, and results around adulthood, transition, guidance and guidance-oriented teaching and data were analysed using an idiographic method. The results contribute to the design of a training program aimed at enhancing teacher practices, fostering autonomy, and strengthening collaboration with families and external services to ensure more effective and inclusive transition planning.

Keywords: disability; transition to adulthood; teacher training; transition plan; idiographic approach.

1. Background

“Transition” represents the step into specific adult roles and responsibilities (Morgan & Reisen, 2016) related to work opportunities, independent living choices and activities, social participation and inclusion, continuing education and access to higher education programs (Lindsay et al., 2018). These adult outcomes commonly are challenging for young adults with disabilities (Stewart et al., 2006) and the main difficulties are often determined by the type of the disability and related support degree (Canton & Kagan, 2007) as well as by personal and environmental factors characterizing the life contexts (Giraldo et al., 2021). Due to its characteristics, this lifetime has often been reported by students with disabilities, their families and caregivers as a period of upheaval, confusion, stress and missed decisions (Canton & Kagan, 2007).

According to scholars (Canton & Kagan, 2007), all these challenges call for a more specific and multi-faceted transition planning in which upper secondary schools and the adult services play a crucial role. For this reason, exploring and facilitating the complex transition process for young students with disabilities has now become an important topic internationally for school providers and researchers working within this area and guidance is decisive to accompany them along the transition to adulthood designed for, with and together the students themselves (Foley et al., 2012).

Given the multifactorial nature of the processes and conditions involved in becoming adult, the decline of traditional regulatory mechanisms and the intrinsic complexity of building and designing one's future, guidance represents a

«process aimed at facilitating self-knowledge, of the educational, occupational, social, cultural and economic context of reference, of the strategies implemented to relate and interact in these realities, in order to promote the maturation and development of the skills necessary to be able to independently define or redefine personal and professional objectives that adhere to the context, develop or re-elaborate a life project and support the related choices» (EU, 2008, p. 4).

Therefore, it implies designing self-determined educational plans that guarantee and support all students, including those with disabilities, throughout their lives and across different contexts, in identifying their own abilities, skills and interests, in making decisions regarding education, training and employment, in order to promote the realization of the personal life project in the different contexts and life trajectories (Mura, 2018; Soresi & Nota, 2020).

In such a perspective, the school institutions cannot fail to guide students with the aim of providing those cognitive, social and in-depth self-knowledge tools necessary to develop the structural and fundamental educational outcomes towards adulthood. As the Italian scholar Canevaro (2022) reminds, this purpose is achievable through the promotion of self-determination, autonomy, empowerment and the development of all the skills that are functional to future job placement and independent living. At this regard, research attests that young adults with disabilities who participate in specific support interventions in the transition from school to work achieve better medium-long term employment results than those who do not participate (Fleming et al., 2013). In fact, scientific literature recognizes the importance of such programs and highlights the need for their implementation and promotion of specific transition plans aimed at supporting students with disabilities into adulthood in respect of their life project and functioning profile. In order to make these plans successful and high qualified, school and different stakeholders involved should be able to assume more coordinated and integrated approaches with extra-scholastic territorial contexts (Grigal et al., 2011; Foley et al., 2012) in relation to the different tasks involved in guidance, such as the collection, processing and use of training and professional information; planning and implementation of decisions also in compliance with the preferences, expectations, desires and life plans of each individual (Soresi & Nota, 2020). Notoriously, these actions could be extremely challenging for some disabilities - such as intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorders - and require specific didactic-methodological attention (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

According to these assumptions and the specific purposes of the school institutions called to support the development of personal, soft and professional skills while contributing to the construction of

individual identity, guidance has become, since nursery school, a central topic in European agenda (Eurydice, 2022) to support the inclusion of young adults with disabilities. As a State Member, Italy has adopted this institutional mandate into different legislative frameworks by integrating them into its full inclusion provision system. Some indications, albeit liminal, are included in the 2009 *Guidelines for the School Integration of Pupils with Disabilities* (2009), which sanctioned the mandatory requirement for school and its teaching staff (curricular and support teachers, educators, etc.¹) to

«activate specific guidance actions to ensure continuity in the subject's education by the next school or post-school pathway chosen" and to "prepare educational plans that foreshadow, including through guidance, the possible choices that the students will undertake after completing schooling» (MIUR, 2009, p. 16).

A more specific attention is contained in the 2014 *National Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance* (MIUR, 2014), now revised in the recent 2022 document. This latter also emphasises guidance-oriented teaching as a fundamental didactic tool «organized from students' experiences, with the overcoming only the transmissive dimension of knowledge and with the enhancement of didactic laboratory, of flexible time and space, and of the opportunities offered by the exercise of autonomy» (MIM, 2022, p. 3). Not coincidentally, the recent *Guidelines for the Compilation of the New Individualized Educational Plan* (IEP) Model (MIM, 2023)² also containing an explicit reference to guidance and specific recommendations particularly related to *Plans for Transversal Skills and Orientation* (PCTO)³. Nevertheless, despite the growing emphasis from the scientific community and regulatory frameworks, guidance and guidance-oriented teaching still struggle to be effectively translated into teachers' practices (Dettori & Botes, 2023). In particular, recent studies on some Italian schools highlight still current *worst practices* (Caldin & Scollo, 2017; Mura, 2018, Soresi & Nota, 2020; Montanari & Travaglini, 2024): a) gathering the guidance activities delivery at the end of the different

¹ The role of the support teacher was introduced in Italy with Law 517 of 1977, which established the full inclusion model in the Italian educational system. The support teacher is assigned to the class that includes a student with disabilities and collaborates with the class teachers, sharing joint responsibility in developing individualized education plans. After several reforms, today one becomes a support teacher by completing a one-year postgraduate university specialization program.

² IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) were introduced in Italy with Law No. 104 of 1992 to support the inclusion process of students with disabilities in the Italian compulsory educational system. The purpose of this document is to build inclusive teaching: "a welcoming community where everyone, regardless of personal circumstances, finds opportunities for growth experiences," as stated on the Ministry of Education and Merit website "*Progettare l'inclusione. Percorsi e modelli*" ("*Designing Inclusion: Paths and Models*"). The national unified model for IEPs (*Piano Educativo Individualizzato*) was introduced in Italian schools with Ministerial Decree No. 182 of 2020 and its related Guidelines, which updated the provisions established by Legislative Decree No. 66/2017. Subsequently, on August 1, 2023, Interministerial Decree No. 153 of 2023 was published on the Ministry of Education and Merit website, introducing corrective measures to the previous Ministerial Decree No. 182/2020. These updates were developed within the framework of a new approach to support measures for students with disabilities. Today, the most recent regulatory provisions on disability and inclusion (Decree No. 66/2017 and No. 96/2019) strengthen the multidisciplinary network for supporting inclusion. This approach aims to implement the inclusion process as a network action tailored to students with disabilities, reformulating the multidisciplinary network. Ministerial Decree No. 96 of 2019 places greater emphasis on the inter-institutionality of the inclusion project and renews working groups such as the Operational Working Group for Inclusion (GLO), the Territorial Inter-Institutional Group (GIT), the Territorial Support Centres (CTS), and the Polo Schools. The GLO, as a collegial entity, is responsible for drafting and approving the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for students with certified disabilities. It is composed of all the teachers of the Class Council, both curricular and support teachers, and is chaired by the School Head or a delegated figure. Additionally, it involves the student with disabilities and their parents or those exercising parental responsibility, along with internal and external professional figures who interact with the student in their development. The GIT is designed to facilitate collaboration among institutions and stakeholders involved in inclusion, while the CTS provides technical and operational support for inclusive practices. Lastly, the Polo Schools act as reference points for coordinating inclusive education activities. These measures reflect a structured, networked approach to ensuring tailored support for students with disabilities, fostering collaboration across institutions and professional figures involved in the inclusion process.

³ To bring schools closer to the world of work, Law 107/2015 provided for the implementation of mandatory school-work alternation pathways for all students in the last three years of high school, the so-called "Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e l'orientamento" (PCTO). PCTO represents an integrated teaching methodology that complements classroom education by transferring curricular knowledge and skills to students. It creates formative experiences to help students better understand how the world of work operates. At the same time, students acquire so-called transversal skills (soft skills), which are qualities applicable to various contexts and are highly sought after by employers today. The PCTO are framed within the overall educational planning, and therefore they constitute a fundamental aspect of the study plan.

school grades; b) designing guidance plan on "predefined routes" based on summary students' categories; c) flattening guidance to an informative task; d) limited knowledge, skills and training of the teaching staff regarding personalized methodologies to implement guidance-oriented teaching activities, in particular with an inclusive focus; e) the weak connection with other formal, but also informal and non-formal structures in the territory; f) the still massive presence of prejudices and stereotypes linked to disability with the consequent risk of hypertrophying the identity, training and professional development of the person with disabilities and the limited dissemination of theoretical and practical knowledge to implement a training orientation that is truly capable of fully deploying its purposes also for students with disabilities.

These shortcomings urge enhancing specific teachers' training programs with respect to transition to adulthood and related guidance tasks (Grigal et al., 2011) aiming at providing functional knowledge and professional skills for implementing guidance and guidance-oriented teaching activities, while responding to the specific needs of learners with disabilities and finding highly inclusive solutions (WHO, 2022). To achieve this, research suggests to design specific training course starting from a preliminary exploration of professionals' knowledge, perceptions as well as their work experiences with respect to the subject matter (Knowles, 1996; Demetrio, 1999).

From these foundations, this contribution presents the results of an online qualitative questionnaire administered to support teachers who will attend a training program carried out in the intervention phase of the action research STRADE (*Supporting the Transition to Adulthood for persons with Disabilities from an Ecosystemic perspective*) delivered to Italian secondary school teachers in Bergamo area. Specifically, the paper collected knowledge, perceptions, challenges, and results around adulthood, transition, guidance and guidance-oriented teaching and data were analysed using an idiographic method (Allport, 1982).

2. Study design

This study is part of the STRADE action research launched in October 2021 by the University of Bergamo's Chair of Special Pedagogy, in collaboration with the "Lorenzo Lotto" institute. Using an ecosystemic (WHO, 2001) and participatory (McIntyre, 2007) approach, the project aimed to design an educational model supporting the transition to adulthood for students with disabilities in upper secondary school. *Table 1* illustrates all project phases.

| PROJECT PHASES | DESCRIPTION |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. INITIATION | Formation of the Technical Group, comprising all members appointed by the Coordination Group, tasked with designing the model, promoting the process, and defining objectives, timelines, content, and tools |
| 2. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS | Critical review of existing models and tools at local, national, and international levels, designed to meet the objectives and content targeted by the RAP process |
| 3. INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVATION PATH | Development of the model and its associated tools through a shared conceptual framework (both socio-pedagogical and methodological), tailored to the specific needs, resources, and context of the client |
| 4. INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENTATION | Iterative testing of the model and tools in multiple phases, beginning with predefined samples and refining them based on results through a cyclical process: analysis-application-reanalysis-modification |
| 5. INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION | Full-scale implementation of the finalized model within the institutional framework |
| 6. DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS | Presentation and sharing of the outcomes of the action-research process, including both the methodology and results |

Table 1 STRADE phases

The present study focuses on the fourth phase, which includes a training program for support teachers on the transition to adulthood and guidance planning. Based on adult education literature (Knowles, 1996; Demetrio, 1999), the training design followed an exploratory qualitative approach (Thorne, 2008) to assess teachers' knowledge and practices. Data were collected using open-ended questions and analyzed with the idiographic method (Saqr & López-Pernas, 2021), which allows for deep insights into individual perceptions and practices (Trincherro, 2002). The findings aim to identify the specific training needs of support teachers, which are addressed in the further course.

2.1 Participants

This study involved 24 support teachers from the "Lorenzo Lotto" institute, with 58.3% female and 41.7% male participants. The most represented age group was 41-45 years (25%), followed by 31-35 and 46-50 years (both 20.8%). Fewer participants were aged 26-30 (8.3%) and over 50 years (8.3%). In terms of qualifications, 62.5% held a university degree, while others had a bachelor's degree (12.5%), secondary school diplomas (4.2%), or socio-pedagogical educator qualifications (4.2%). Over half (54.2%) had completed the Ministerial specialisation course for support teachers. Regarding professional experience, 41.7% had 1-10 years, 25% more than 10 years, and 16.7% had less than a year's experience. Half of the participants (50%) had permanent contracts, while the other half were substitutes. Additionally, 54.2% had participated in specific training on disability and educational guidance.

2.2 Data collection: Online Questionnaire

The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire with open-ended questions, designed by researchers to gather support teachers' knowledge, opinions, and reflections on topics such as transition, adulthood, educational guidance, and guidance-oriented teaching activities. It also aimed to explore concerns related to transition planning and guidance-oriented teaching, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of current educational practices for students with disabilities. The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions divided into four sections: *biographical* (collecting personal and professional data), *knowledge* (exploring respondents' understanding of key concepts), *perceptions of practices* (focusing on guidance-oriented teaching practices and external support), and *strengths and weaknesses* (examining factors that facilitate or hinder transition, and the effectiveness of Individualized Education Plans).

2.3 Data analysis: idiographic method

The textual variables from the questionnaire were analyzed using the idiographic research method (Allport, 1962) which focused on examining specific units of analysis (such as individuals or teams) over time or across different contexts. Unlike the nomothetic approach, which aggregates data from large groups, the idiographic method looks at variability within a single unit, allowing for the identification of functional relationships (Lyon et al., 2017). Although idiographic research is rare and its findings narrow (Ito, López-Pernas, & Saqr, 2024), it provides detailed insights into a phenomenon and helps establish causal relationships (Barlow & Nock, 2009). To answer the research questions, the researchers organized and reviewed the data, identified key themes, validated the findings, and analyzed intra-unit differences. The final step was to synthesize these insights into a coherent narrative (Trincherro, 2002).

3. Results and discussion

The analysis of responses from the 24 teachers offers a clear and coherent understanding of their knowledge and perceptions regarding the concepts of transition, adulthood, educational guidance and guidance-oriented teaching activities. It also suggests a deep reflection on the educational and instructional processes, strategies and challenges involved in supporting students with disabilities. Regarding the concept of transition, over 90% of participants associates the term with the idea of a "passage" understood as the movement from one phase of life to another. This transition is not only

described in terms of change but also as a process of transformation and growth, with 85% of responses using words such as “development”, “transformation”, and “progress”. However, approximately 30% of teachers also underscores the more complex and critical aspects of this process, employing terms like “uncertainty”, “effort,” or “fear”. Consistent with literature (Stewart et al., 2006), these feelings often result in a general sense of disorientation and abandonment that, in many cases, accompanies this passage.

Furthermore, some of the responses make use of visual metaphors, such as the “butterfly”, to depict the process of change, conveying an image that embodies both fragility and the potential for growth. According to the definition of “emerging adulthood” by Arnett (2000), this metaphor highlights a dual perspective on the transition process: as both an opportunity for personal and social development—a time for individuals to grow and expand their possibilities—and a critical juncture requiring careful guidance, support, and accompaniment to successfully navigate its challenges. Moreover, this perception underscores the teachers' clear awareness not only of the difficulties and uncertainties that may accompany the transition to adulthood for students with disabilities, but also of its vital importance and the need of well-structured, thoughtful approach in designing Individual Education Plans starting from students' voices (Goussot, 2009). Their involvement is explicitly addressed in Italian legislation: the recent Legislative Decree No. 96 of 2019 repeatedly emphasizes the role they should play in collecting their needs, aspirations, and knowledge and shaping their educational journey and beyond (Bianquin & Sacchi, 2023).

Most participants (75%) define adulthood through key concepts such as “responsibility,” “self-awareness” (65%), and “autonomy” (60%), describing it as a stage characterized by increased self-determination and life management. Additionally, 20% of responses focuses on social roles like work, family, intimate relationships, and sexuality, reflecting a practical understanding of adulthood's challenges, consistent with research on the role of social integration in adult identity and well-being. For individuals with disabilities, achieving these roles often requires tailored support and the removal of barriers (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010). However, 15% of teachers connects adulthood with fear, compromise, or uncertainty, underscoring its inherent complexities.

These results demonstrate support teachers' nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of transition and adulthood and their acknowledgement of the cruciality of such adult outcomes particularly for youth with disabilities (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Indeed, these students, upon completing high school, often face substantial limitations in accessing typical community roles and activities according to their needs (Stewart, 2006). This exclusion negatively affects their quality of life across various domains (Simoes & Santos, 2016) and hinders the development of positive life trajectories (Wagner et al., 2005). It also impacts the overall balance and well-being of their families (Brennan, et al., 2020). Furthermore, individuals with disabilities report limited opportunities to make autonomous choices and express preferences about key aspects of their daily lives (Shogren & Broussard, 2011).

Regarding educational guidance, 80% of respondents emphasizes the concept of “accompaniment” and stress the critical role of teachers in supporting students through the decision-making process and in designing transition plans aligned with their abilities and potential. This perspective settles on Italian legislative provisions, particularly on the *2014 Guidelines for lifelong guidance*, in which guidance aims to nurture those competencies necessary for individuals (including students with disabilities) to independently define or redefine personal and professional goals, develop or adjust life plans, and make informed choices that align with their aspirations and circumstances (MIUR, 2014). In this regard, 40% of participants also recognize the “planning phase” as one of the key actions for guidance and “collaboration” as necessary *modus operandi* to support students with disabilities during transition to adulthood across different life contexts.

Approximately 70% of teachers highlights the importance of tools like Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and functional diagnoses in designing effective guidance pathways. They also stress collaboration with external services, as outlined in Law 104/1992, which promotes a multidisciplinary approach. Tools such as Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento (PCTO) and checklists based on the *International Classification of Functioning* (ICF) are considered essential for monitoring and fostering life skills. Strategies such as workshop-based teaching (62%), cooperative

learning, and problem-solving methods appear effective in promoting inclusion, autonomy, and student engagement. Apprenticeships and experiential learning are particularly valued for helping students discover their strengths and develop independence. Key competences like autonomy in travel, money management, and daily tasks are identified by 75% of teachers as critical for transitioning to adulthood.

Family and student involvement in guidance plans is deemed essential but varied based on context and resources. About 70% of teachers reports engaging students through reflective practices, apprenticeships, and group activities to enhance relational skills, consistent with research on self-determination in transition planning (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2003). However, 30% notes limited student opportunities, particularly in the early years of guidance implementation. Family involvement, reported by 60% of teachers, primarily occurred during IEP development or Operational Working Groups (GLO) and focused on setting educational goals and PCTO placements, aligning with studies on the importance of family support across transitions. Consistent with literature (Turnbull et al., 2007), barriers determining low parental engagement and mismatched expectations are cultural background, socioeconomic factors, or stress. About 75% of teachers highlights the value of interagency collaboration and community partnerships, according to research on supporting young persons with disabilities during transitions (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). External services such as social workers, cooperatives, and local agencies are critical in supporting guidance pathways, particularly in managing internships and providing vocational resources. Facilitators include strong territorial networks, such as cooperatives and inclusion projects, which offered key opportunities for internships and workshops, as emphasized in research on work-based learning and community-based rehabilitation (Kaske et al., 2022).

Regarding guidance-oriented teaching, around 80% of respondents demonstrates familiarity with the concept, describing it as a didactic methodology aimed at helping students to identify their aptitudes, skills, and limitations to make informed educational and career choices. According to 50% of teachers, the application of such an approach requires curriculum flexibility and personalized strategies. However, 40% cited issues such as limited resources, time, and teacher collaboration, highlighting the need for professional development and support. Additionally, 30% identifies a lack of hands-on activities as a gap in preparing students for adulthood, underlining the importance of experiential learning and practical applications (Thomas & Woods, 2003). Frontal teaching and insufficient cross-curricular activities are considered inadequate for fostering essential life skills, reinforcing the need for inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005) that emphasizes active, collaborative, and practical learning. These results gathered on the topic of guidance-oriented teaching confirm the growing awareness and knowledge among teachers about this concept, supported by recent ministerial guidelines and the training campaigns of recent years, but, at the same time, they also clearly highlight the challenges teachers face in translating it into daily teaching practice.

4. Final considerations and perspectives

The analysis of the questionnaire responses highlights support teachers' nuanced understanding of key concepts like transition, adulthood, guidance and guidance-oriented teaching, particularly for students with disabilities. They recognize transition as a transformative process requiring tailored support and view adulthood as a stage marked by autonomy and responsibility, though often accompanied by challenges such as uncertainty and fear. Despite growing awareness of guidance and guidance-oriented teaching, supported by recent national policies and informative campaigns, teachers still face significant barriers in applying these approaches in practice. Limited resources, time constraints, and the need for more experiential, collaborative methods hinder their ability to fully implement effective, inclusive guidance strategies that address students' diverse needs.

Concluding, the results offer valuable insights for designing teacher training programs that both recognize existing knowledge and skills and foster new skills for professional growth. Given the diversity of participants' backgrounds, a modular approach to training could be effective, allowing teachers to engage with different components based on their specific needs. Specifically, this

evidence shapes the training course and contents further delivered in STRADE fourth phase. It is composed of three modules respectively focused on: 1. *adulthood*, exploring autonomy, responsibility, and decision-making within the framework of key competencies for lifelong learning; 2. *on-the-job training and support* using teachers' transition plans, simulations and case studies and equipping them with evidence-based methods; 3. *stakeholders' network* highlighting collaboration with families and external services, offering tools/skills for effective communication, conflict resolution, and shared goal-setting to align expectations for students' futures.

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