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## Inclusion-related Professionalization of Ongoing Elementary School Teachers – Collaborative and Bilingual Teaching of the Subject Inclusive Education in a Multilingual Border Region

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Schlagworte: elementary school; professionalization; inclusive education; Italy

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# **Inclusion-related Professionalization of Ongoing Elementary School Teachers – Collaborative and Bilingual Teaching of the Subject Inclusive Education in a Multilingual Border Region**

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## **Abstract**

This article provides the conceptualization of a bilingually (German/Italian) and collaboratively held lecture of Inclusive Education in the context of the elementary teacher study course (master's level) at the Free University of Bolzano/Italy where qualification for an inclusive educational practice is obligatory for all students. Teacher education in this culturally diverse region is structured multilingually (German, Italian, Ladin), but with much of the study being separated by language. In the presented concept of a collaboratively held lecture, students are therefore specifically brought into a bilingual exchange, encouraged to reflexively process the inclusion-related professional experiences acquired in the internships and the cultural boundedness of knowledge which we discuss it in the light of teachers' professionalization theory.

Keywords: elementary school, professionalization, inclusive education, Italy

## **Outline**

1. Teacher Education in Italy and the Province of Bozen-Bolzano
2. Inclusion-related Teachers' Qualification in a Multilingual Cross-cultural Region
3. References

## **1 Teacher Education in Italy and the Province of Bozen-Bolzano**

In this article we reflect on a bilingually held lecture at the Free University of Bozen/Bolzano, Italy. For a better understanding, we preface our considerations on university teaching with summary information on the educational system in Italy.

### 1.1 Elementary School and Early Education

The elementary school in Italy is part of an overall inclusive education system (for further reading in inclusive education see Müller, 2024, in this anthology). It comprises five years of schooling, follows on from kindergarten, and continues to the three-year middle school, all of which have also been attended by all children together since the 1970s (Pulyer & Stuppner, 2019; Ianes, Demo & Dell’Anna, 2020). Curricula apply to all children; in case of administrated as having “Special Educational Needs”, children receive an individual education plan, which is to be integrated as a hinge (Chiappetta Cajola, 2015) between individualization and commonality in elementary education. Within this frame, in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano the educational system is structured according to different languages of instruction. When a child enters each new educational level families decide whether s/he should attend a kindergarten/school having as educational language either German, Italian or Ladin. In each case the other language(s) – German and/or Italian – is/are taught as a subject in the sense of a second language.

### 1.2 Teachers’ Qualification for Elementary School and Kindergarten in an Inclusive Educational System

Compared internationally, in Italy an academic qualification for elementary school teaching was fully accredited quite late (1998). Since then, university education for elementary school teachers is uniformly regulated by the Ministry of Education in a five-year university master’s degree program. There is no preparatory service at the end of the program; instead, students must complete internships in kindergartens and elementary schools which are interlinked with the university courses during the five years (for further reading in elementary teacher education see Seifert, 2024, in this anthology).

The study program offers graduates the opportunity to work both in elementary schools and kindergartens. One of the obligatory educational goals of teacher education in Italy is an inclusively thinking and acting teacher (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2014; Seitz, 2011). Consequently, the inclusive education perspective should be taken up in all study subjects and inclusion-related curricular components must therefore be taken by all students as a compulsory part of the study course.

### 1.3 Teachers’ Qualification for Elementary School and Kindergarten in a Multilingual Border Region

At the Faculty of Education of the University of Bozen/Bolzano, a multilingual and culturally diverse region, teaching is offered in four languages (German, Italian, English, Ladin). However, this is structured by, on the one hand, studying separately according to the chosen language, but at the same time making high language demands on all students (Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021). They must demonstrate high proficiency in German and Italian as well as in English, and study at least 30 ECTS in the respective second language and 15 ECTS in English (unibz, 2017). This solution is not without contradictions to the shaped by pluri-linguism and cultural hybridity life-situation of

students and the inclusive structure of the Italian educational system with the upcoming demands on dealing with diversity for teachers.

Graduates of the program again encounter ambivalences in their professional life because the majority of kindergartens and elementary schools are monolingually conceptualized whereas in a growing part of families at least two languages are spoken equally. Moreover, most other social subsectors are organized bi- or trilingually (administration, etc.) and proven bilingualism is a formal requirement for all higher qualified professions within the region.

Educational practice is this way characterized by a structure oriented towards difference along the language of instruction used at school; the language chosen by families in kindergarten and school for their children is *the* segregation feature in the province of Bolzano and ultimately represents a form of inclusive exclusion (Stichweh, 2013) within an inclusive educational system. At present, however, families often choose educational institutions for their child that do not correspond to the first language practiced in the family (Zinn, 2018). This is also reflected in the form of pronounced multilingual peer-cultural practices among children, which include not only German and Italian but also different dialects and other languages of origin, and thus overall run counter to the linguistically segregating organizational structure of educational institutions.

## **2 Inclusion-related Teachers' Qualification in a Multilingual Border Region**

The considerations made imply specific tensions for the inclusion-related university qualification of teacher students at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano which will be discussed in depth in the following.

### **2.1 Inclusion-related Teachers' Qualification at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano**

Regarding qualification for an inclusive education system, it can be asked how aspects of inclusion and exclusion at kindergarten and school, including diversity-related ambivalences, can be taken up and productively dealt with in university teaching. A research-oriented university education aiming at a scientifically reflective habitus of professionally acting teachers (cf. Helsper, 2018) not only includes building up appropriate "knowing-how", but also reflexive processes, enabling a contextualization and reframing of inclusion-related experiences made (Seitz & Ślodyczyk, 2020). This is because students are encouraged to critically relate experience-based knowledge acquired in their practice at kindergartens or elementary schools and encounter requirements for professional socialization that are shaped by the respective organizational cultures to the knowledge acquired at the university.

For university teaching this also implies a critical-reflexive view of school/kindergarten cultures concerning societal diversity, multilingualism and social practices of

“doing difference” (Machold & Wienand, 2021). Concretely, the lecture “Inclusive Education” is therefore designed bilingually, in Italian and in German, and is offered jointly to all students enrolled for the different study courses in either Italian, German or Latin. Students are brought into a multilingual exchange and are asked to reflect on experiences of inclusion and exclusion in their own educational biography as well as in their professional practice during their internships. In this way, cultural formations of linguistically different knowledge corpi and professional discourses as well as diverse educational biographical imprints are made accessible for reflection.

## 2.2 The Lecture “Inclusive Education”

The lecture “Inclusive Education” is placed in the 8<sup>th</sup> semester of the study course and is organized in three-hours teaching blocks, of which each session also includes short active work phases. Decision on topics, learning styles and assessment methods have been guided by three main ideas to foster a joint multilingual and critical reflection on aspects of inclusive education. First, meaningful topics that allow for a problem-oriented critical reflection of theoretical approaches, didactic models and educational practices conceived in different frames and discourses have been selected and are worked on by means of preparatory readings, short lectures and discussions in an internationally framed theoretical background. In concrete, this regards knowledge on the macro level of (different) educational systems, the societal function of educational institutions and on governance dynamics at the meso level of organizational development processes and organizational cultures, as well as the micro level of educational conceptualizations and action-guiding pedagogical and didactical orientations. For all these levels, fundamental notions for decision taking in professional actions, such as individualization and communality or support and assessment, have been addressed highlighting and discussing their origin in partly diverging knowledge corpi related with diverging educational systems. The idea is that distance taking from ways of thinking “taken for granted” (Scott, 2014), opens a meta-level from which the location-boundedness (Mannheim, 1952) of specific scientific positions and discourses can be made conscious. One example is the slightly divergent notions of the overarching considered important idea of antinomies between the theory of the “trilemma of inclusion”, developed in Germany (Boger 2023) and the concept of “speciality/normality”, developed in Italy (Ianes & Demo 2022), which enables critical theory-led reflections on knowledge generation in relation to national (and regional) policies and practices.

Second, the choice of learning styles, materials and assessment modes was guided by the awareness of working with a linguistically diverse group of student teachers. The challenge of creating an accessible learning environment has been tackled for example by putting into practice some principles of the Universal Design for Learning to simultaneously reduce possible learning barriers for students and become vivid examples of practicing inclusive teaching according to the theoretical notions presented in the lecture (Bartz et al., 2018; Demo & Ianes, 2021). Peer interaction as a means for intersubjective reflection – mirroring knowledge discourses within educational organizations – has been facilitated through learning methods that are strongly based on group work

(Knauf et al., 2018). Co-teaching allows translations and searching for language-equivalents as well as for multilingual approaches to the same or to similar concepts where students are always free to choose which language they use. Flipped learning has been implemented, by reading materials in changing languages given in advance and ensuring time during the lectures for peer-based reflection on them. Furthermore, students can choose the language and topic to be deepened in an individually written essay in preparation of the exam according to their preferences.

Third, a particular role during the lectures plays the analysis of (partly video-based) case-situations which open divergent interpretations and different options for action (for example, to link individualization and commonality), whereby changing observation perspectives are first adopted and then divergent written interpretations of the scene are reflected upon (Seitz & Hamacher, in press). This approach inspires discussions in small groups on possible educational strategies as well as the pedagogical and didactical orientations behind them which can then be related to the diverging experiences made during internships. This enables at the same time in-depth work in alternating languages, which also explicitly calls for a discourse on meanings of pedagogical and didactical situations and the negotiation of appropriate terms in the different languages. This way, strategies for collaboration in groups shaped by diversity but also for co-teaching are not only presented, but also personally experienced.

### 2.3 Conclusion and Perspectives

Summing up, the presented example is based on the assumption that deliberately constructed augmentation of diversity of the students' learning group and the contact with notions and concepts originated in diverse knowledge corpi can be seen as a motor for inclusion-related teachers' professionalization as they ask to rethink and analyze the – partly implicit – guiding principles and concepts of scientific knowledge as well as practices the university students are familiar with (Darling-Hammond, 2017). This way addressing ambivalences, tensions, and contradictions between the discourses from different contexts and related critical reflections activated in peer groups can also contribute to the formation of an inclusion-related scientifically reflective habitus of professionally acting teachers.

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