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Interactions and social identity of support teachers: An ethnographic study of the marginalisation in the inclusive school

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Educational personnel are seen as agents of change toward inclusive schools. This research aims to examine the daily-based interactions through which inclusion is experienced by support teachers and how their social identity is constructed within a secondary school in a northern Italy province. The theoretical basis of this research is formed by the conceptual contributions of social identity approach and symbolic interactionism to understand self-categorization and identification processes, through the narratives of actors. An ethnographic design was implemented, with 4-month participant observation and 20 semi-structured interviews of long duration as the main data collection techniques. Fieldnotes and interviews transcriptions were inductively analyzed through a thematic approach to grounded theorising. Results show a school community in which there is a strong hierarchical relationship among main and support teachers, where support teachers experience strong feelings of inferiority and marginalisation, since they have entered school. These school interactions are also shaped by the school culture and management. However, support teachers have a potential avant-garde role as agents of change in the inclusion process. Future research should target this aspect to investigate best inclusive practices.

KEYWORDS

inclusion, support teachers, special education need, school community, student with disability

Introduction

The main purpose of this research is to examine the daily-based interactions among support teachers (STs) and main teachers (MTs) through which the phenomenon of inclusion is experienced and how the STs' social identity is constructed within a secondary school in a northern Italy province.

Since the Salamanca Statement ([United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation \(UNESCO\), 1994](#)), which stands for a turning point for inclusive education,

a heated debate on this issue has evolved (Lindsay, 2003). As a result, the notion of inclusion has been grasped from various perspectives, each one showing various levels of complexity and criticism. In a broad sense, inclusion is understood as a set of instruments for achieving equity and social justice goals (Liasidou, 2012). However, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) have identified at least four different definitions of inclusion: (a) as not physically segregating students with disabilities (DSs) outside the classroom, (b) as a pedagogical focus on DSs educational needs, (c) as a wider pedagogical focus seeking to integrate all the diverse needs coming from all students without differentiating them, and finally, (d) as a cornerstone of school community building. In the midst of this overarching definitional heterogeneity (Young, 2008), the implementation of inclusion echoes a high level of variability.

During the last decades, however, a major debate on educational philosophy has introduced a new lens from which to comprehend inclusion. The propensity to circumscribe inclusion to DSs has gradually lost legitimacy in the light of a wider sort of engagement, involving students, teachers, and managers, in the attempt to change education as a whole. The key to the transition towards this wider vision has been a down-to-earth analytical displacement in school contexts and educational environments.

In this sense, Zanazzi (2018) differentiates two models of inclusion: on the one hand, the reductionist model which only focuses on DSs incorporation into mainstream school's frameworks; on the other, the systemic model which observes and assesses inclusive practices in school settings and the way they are shaped and get to shape educational structures. The present research shares with Nilholm (2021) the idea that inclusion theorisation and practice depend on the socio-cultural contexts that schools belong to, their organisational culture and their management style (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Ryu et al., 2020).

Furthermore, some studies from a critically-inspired approach have underlined some relevant ethical and political issues underpinning the implementation of inclusion in school settings. For Slee (2001), inclusion turns out to be a euphemism frequently used to alleviate the guilt caused by education delivery failure. Similarly, Cooper (2004) argues that inclusion is a buzzword whose utilisation has become morally obligatory in everyday discourses and in the wording of school and policy documents. Skidmore (2004), in turn, suggests that in implementing inclusion abstract ideological positions are incarnated, which have little or no connection to the school reality. Liasidou (2012) states that inclusion allows for an unequal distribution of power and knowledge in schools. Although it has been argued that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours are critical factors in building an inclusive context (Bhroin and King, 2020), the critical approach underscores the role of the school community in the inclusion process. And in so doing,

this approach has put in the forefront some forms of interaction through which inclusion is daily experienced, i.e., collaboration, communication, power and even exclusion (Hansen et al., 2020; Paju et al., 2021).

The emphasis in socio-cultural contexts and school interactions has been crucial for us to formulate our research proposal. Even if Italian schools are recognised for a long tradition of inclusive practices, the STs constitute an ambiguous professional figure which requires further exploration beyond its legal framework (Tammaro et al., 2017; Ianes et al., 2020). In fact, tradition has been codified through a legal framework that shapes the social reality of inclusion, by introducing two key actors: DS and ST. As for DS, they are endowed with the right to enter school within a special regime and only if disability is certified by a clinical report (Framework Law 104/1992, Italian Official Gazette, 1971b). Thus, a medical diagnosis, in accordance with the International Classification of Functioning (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2007), turns out to be the means by which an "enabling nature" is brought into existence – a nature that enables DS to be part of school. The existence of STs cannot be understood without either the DSs' "enabling nature" or the STs own regulatory frame that defines their role (Law 517/77, Italian Official Gazette, 1977). DS and ST have an interdependent existence from their inception. DSs must attend regular classes (Law 118/1971, in the Italian Official Gazette, 1971a), where MTs must be supported by STs, which are recognized as members of the teaching team and, hence, should take part in all class-related activities such as planning and evaluation. Since recently, in order to take up the role of ST, it is mandatory to attend a one-year academic training programme, organised by the Ministry of Education (D.M. 249/2010).

Despite being scarce, the research carried out in Italy on this topic indicates a challenging relationship between MTs and STs (Devecchi et al., 2012), a matter that will be addressed in this work. While the very role of STs, and their professional capabilities, are often distrusted by MTs, a more positive perception of issues concerning disability has been found in STs (Arcangeli et al., 2020). A gap in the literature about the self-perception of STs in the relationships with MTs and the hierarchical and power relations among them. Therefore, the research topic revolves around these dynamics.

Another branch of the current scholarly endeavour has been devoted to evaluating the STs professional development conceived as an individual's training (Gaspari, 2017; Gaggioli and Sannipoli, 2021). The problem here is that many challenges STs face as soon as they enter the school community and get immersed in the full set of its inner interactions, are neglected. Also, the public debate revolves around kindergarten and primary school (Antonietti et al., 2017), leaving secondary schools in oblivion. Therefore, the research methods and instruments of the present research were deliberately chosen to comprehend the challenges that STs cope with, in terms of the inclusion experience and their social identity in a northern Italy secondary school. We share with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Abbreviations: DS, Student with disability; ST, Support teacher; MT, Main teacher; SCST, Specialisation Course for Support Teacher; SIA, Social identity approach; SIT, Social identity theory; SCT, Self-categorization theory; ISTAT, Italian National Institute of Statistics; WHO, World Health Organisation.

(UNESCO) (2020) the belief that education personnel may well be leading agents in the process of restructuring educational frameworks in an inclusive vein.

Theoretical background

Our main theoretical background rests in the social identity approach (SIA), which suggests that a person's self is primarily determined by the social context and the groups they belong to and, eventually, identify with. Besides, this approach indicates that people seek to develop and maintain a positive image of the self by constantly comparing intergroup and outgroup (Rushton and Reiss, 2020). Seen so, identity is neither static nor immutable, but as an effect of negotiations and movement, certainly influenced by social meanings at hand and their symbolic and material expressions (Liu and Xu, 2011).

The SIA combines the social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and the self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987). Generally speaking, while SIT has introduced the concept of social identity into the analysis of intergroup dynamics, SCT has focused on the self as a fundamental component of identity. Basically, social identity is the knowledge of the individual seen as appertaining to a reference group and as sharing its emotions, beliefs, and values (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). As an extension of SIT, SCT tries to explain the social-cognitive underpinnings of group behavior in terms of the individual process of self-categorization, which is interwoven with social frames deriving from reference groups (Abrams and Hogg, 1990). Notwithstanding some criticism regarding individualistic biases (Farr, 1996) and reification of a heterogeneous phenomenon (Abrams and Hogg, 2004), the SIA provides with a robust theoretical framework to analyzing the socio-cognitive foundation of social identity and the construction of the self in intergroup relations. As we aim to show in this paper, social identity depends on the contexts where that socio-cognitive construction happens.

Recently, this approach has been widely used in social research which conceives education as a collaborative process involving different groups of people within a school community (Liu and Xu, 2011; Mavor et al., 2017). Some research has also been conducted about intergroup dynamics in school settings, and the SIA has become one of the most influential perspectives of group processes and intergroup relations so far (Jackson and Sherriff, 2013). However, Brown (2000) has identified some issues that would defy the SIA's assumptions. One of them, which is relevant for this research, has to do with how identity formation processes build up belief systems that justify inequality among group members and hierarchical orderings among different groups.

Moreover, Hogg et al. (1995) and Stets and Burke (2000) have suggested that SIA could benefit from the symbolic interactionism view. Far away from the stimulus-response model in social psychology, symbolic interactionism underlines the capacity of people to problematize and make sense of the situations they are

engaged in and experience along with others on a regular basis. In other words, perceptions arise from action-in-context and social order comes from habits performed under the same interpretative frame. Additionally, social meaning is neither an immanent property of things in themselves nor a transcendent property of mind. Rather, meaning is the symbolic elaboration steaming from interactions between subjects and subjects and objects (Baert, 1998; Joas, 2001).

Mead (1934) is a cornerstone in the theoretical development of symbolic interactionism, due to the emphasis put on intersubjectivity to understand how society is not an external structure but an effect of communication between people. Indeed, an individual can take the counter position in an argument and empathise with a holder of an opposing viewpoint, through language and meaningful gestures. These both are the basis from which social intelligence – or, in Sennett (2012) terms, empathy arises. For Sennett, empathy and dialogue are social skills that may ease what he calls “complex cooperation,” that is, a kind of work that requires the joint effort of individuals and groups that do not share the same values or beliefs; that do not belong to the same social class, gender, or nationality, or that do not speak the same language. In a nutshell, people need to work together without losing their heterogeneity. More specifically, in Sennett's view empathy is defined by curiosity, not by the degree of compassion or identification with others. Dialogue, in turn, is the ability to actively listen, which implies questioning one's own mindset by experiencing the other's point of view.

In our view, dialogue and empathy are useful notions to understand the challenges triggered by the STs and MTs cooperation in the school setting. Finally, the seminal work of Elias and Scotson (1965) about the daily-based interactions between established and marginalised groups in a community, where they explain that newcomer's “inclusion” is not an automatic process that can be ruled from a top-down perspective, but a complex process marked by stigmatisation and exclusion, has been inspirational for our research. The meaning attributed to the words “we” and “they” is indicative of how large social distance is, albeit physical proximity.

All considered, SIA is a useful approach for studying the formation of social identity and the self-categorization phenomenon in educational settings. When combined with symbolic interactionism, SIA spans its scope, putting in the forefront the reflexivity of actors engaged in complex social situations. The social meaning associated with inclusion cannot be taken for granted but should be examined in the light of socio-cultural contexts and a range of experiences such as communication, cooperation, power, and stigmatisation.

Materials and methods

For this research, an ethnographic design was implemented, with participant observation and semi-structured interviews as its main data collection techniques.

The participant observation was accomplished within a single secondary school in a northern Italy city, where the field researcher carried out a 4-month internship as part of the Specialisation Course for Support Teacher (SCST). This internship permitted entering the field, and thus the field researcher had to accomplish two simultaneous roles, one as a ST trainee and another as an ethnographer. Given the opportunity opened by the specialisation programme internship, in the midst of a strict lockdown due to the COVID 19 global pandemic emergency, the decision of choosing that school was considered feasible and suitable. Throughout 4 months, 4 days a week, the field researcher observed STs' classes and workshops, and accompanied them during spare time. So, observations and conversations in both formal and informal interaction settings were registered onto a logbook on a daily basis.

With the purpose of broadening the socio-cultural horizon and enriching participant observation data, 20 semi-structured interviews of long duration were conducted with MTs (9), STs (7) and educators (4), all of them working in the same province where the participant observation was realised. MTs are in charge of curricular subject matter, for instance, "Italian, History and Geography." STs are teachers that, while competent in a curricular subject matter too, hold (or should hold) an additional expertise in educational support (Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), 2020).¹ STs are facilitators of learning, with technical knowledge, but also pedagogical-didactical and relational skills aimed at the inclusion of all students through the process of mediation with colleagues (Cottini, 2019). Educators, in turn, are para-professional operators who manage educational projects aimed at promoting a person's development and socialisation, either in or out of school environments. For participants sampling the snowball technique was initially applied, but as the research progressed, we started using a theoretical sampling technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which is a purposive sample aimed at delving into the topics that became more salient so as to strengthen conceptualization. Most of the interviews were conducted using virtual means and recorded only after verbal consent was conveyed by participants. To encourage an informal tone of conversation as well the rise of novel issues, an interview protocol was designed

using a semi structured approach (Corbetta, 2003), as a list of general topics to be addressed during the interview – i.e., professional trajectory, school inclusive practices, direct experience with DSs, rapport with MTs, school principals, and STs. As stated by Steigmann (2020), non-directive interviews are particularly useful when dealing with such a controversial theme as inclusion.

Fieldnotes and interviews transcriptions were inductively analysed through a thematic approach to grounded theorising (Riessman, 2005). According to Atkinson and Hammersley (2007), grounded theorising is a symbolic interactionist-inspired method that allows for triangulation of diverse data sources, as is the case for this research. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), data analysis began with an "open coding" that encouraged the formulation of questions and comparisons around words and phrases found in the texts. The proliferation of codes and code families allowed the identification of categories with a higher level of abstraction ("axial coding"). The coding process was supported by methodological and analytical notes written down by the researchers. Based on the methodological notes, the researchers decided to begin a theoretical sampling, and based on the analytical notes, the theorization was advanced for each category that now constitutes the 5 macro-themes into which this article is organised. The results derived from a conceptual ordering realised on the qualitative data collected are discussed.²

Results

Five themes emerged from the conceptual ordering of data's properties: (i) School culture and management: The hosts; (ii) legitimacy of the ST role; (iii) STs motivation and value; (iv) the ST group: The guests; (v) answers for a positive identity; and, within the last group, a peculiar subgroup: (a) Collaboration: An oxymoronic response. It is worth noticing that the following results come from a small qualitative sample, and that interviews and conversations were carried out under pandemic conditions that limited face-to-face interaction. These findings are not generalisable but do offer insight and exemplarity about a particular context.

School culture and management: The hosts

Generally, it emerges that making an inclusive philosophy practical requires the commitment of all stakeholders, including the school management. Indeed, the influence of management is crucial in promoting, or hindering, the inclusion of STs in the

1 According to the latest report released by the Italian National Institute of Statistics-ISTAT, one third of STs in Italy are non-specialized teachers, that is, they have not received any training. When a lack of specialised STs is verified, MTs are often asked to take on the support functions in schools. This situation worsens in northern regions, where nearly 44% of MTs devote part of their time to support activities. In the province where the research was conducted, there exists a noticeable increase in the number of students with a certified disability, which in turn raises the demand for STs (Regional School Office, 2020). Despite the rising demand, the STs' labour conditions are still precarious in terms of stability – i.e., most contracts are temporary or no longer than one academic year, and professional coherence – i.e., several non-specialized STs come from professional environments far from education.

2 Confidentiality of personal and organisational information has been guaranteed during the analysis of qualitative data, as well as during the writing of the present piece of research.

school dynamics. An ST interviewee (I) commented on the school principal's attitude, and offered his perception on how that attitude prevented the ST from inclusion:

The school principal demeans, lacks charisma, and does not participate in team building. She lacks an enlightening vision that recovers the pedagogical heritage. She has no vision and is not used to ST because she comes from a high school that is closed to inclusion. (ST8-I)

The lack of empathy, of an inclusive pedagogical heritage, and of a network within the school community seems to be key factors associated with the perceived inferiority of STs as a marginalised professional figure. The point of view of a MT, describing the work done by a ST colleague, underscored that sense of marginalisation: “The ST representative was doing a tremendous amount of work, but it was not appreciated, due to the school principal's lack of vision” (MT5-I).

The school's organisation and community also provide interpretive tools of the concept of inclusion as a symbolic practice. During the field observation (O), a ST provided a situated metaphor about the power relationship among STs, the principal, and colleagues: the ruler and the guests.

There is a problem of structure, and the school principal makes the rules. She says how the guests should behave and not the other way around. And this is a problem concerning the school team. It's unrealistic to shovel the mountain with a spoon. (FM-O)

The ST feels like a weak guest and consequently feels compelled to follow the rules imposed by the host. Furthermore, in perceiving himself as a guest, he does not project himself into the future of the community, nor does he feel able to change the *status quo*.

Legitimacy of the ST role

The interactions between ST and MT are often tough. Indeed, an MT expresses some doubts about the constant increase in disability certifications, questioning in that fashion the value of ST as a mediator of inclusion: “The criticism is that there are too many certifications. [...] How come there were not before? I wonder if this professional profile is necessary, maybe yes, maybe no” (MT1-I). As mentioned earlier, disability certifications that give rise to the “enabling nature” of DSs, and the professional role of STs are both interdependent. Questioning the former is questioning the latter. Thus, the STs role within school seems to be placed in a marginalised position.

This expresses through an explicit misunderstanding of MTs about the rationale of caring disability, as in the next example where a MT interviewee described a recent experience with a DSs' mother:

This mom did everything she could to get her son certified. Once there was a kid who had a low IQ and ... stop! Maybe he didn't go to high school, he went to a vocational school. [...] So I am not sure if I know the issue [...] or if it's the same thing to have a high IQ or a low IQ. [...] Maybe if I understood more, I wouldn't talk about it like that. (MT3-I)

What the MT is acknowledging is a lack of knowledge on disability issues, which in fact is critically viewed by the ST who participated in our research. They feel that their MT colleagues lack pedagogical competencies to simultaneously manage curricular content and relationships with DSs. Two ST colleagues agreed that the MTs they had worked with “sometimes do not really know how to interact with the person with disabilities” (I1, I2-SCST). In this regard, a SCST course instructor, during a lecture, explained that the causes of the lack of training of MTs lies in the continuous change of recruitment rules and added that the only stable training was precisely that of STs (P-SCST). The STs interviewed feel responsible for filling the knowledge gap they observed in the MT's pedagogical domain, as this trainee noted: “Although they [MTs] are in some way sensitive, you can see that there is a lack of awareness in pedagogy” (I3-SCST).

While the interviewed STs think that their MTs colleagues lack pedagogical competencies, the MTs feel themselves unable to understand what is meant for a good inclusive methodology. In this regard, an MT interviewee negatively evaluated her colleague's performance in the classroom: “Instead of coming up beside this little girl, he sat in the back of the room taking notes. I do not know if that's how it's done, I do not know what the methodology is” (MT3-I). Even when the MT has had a positive experience with a ST colleague, the role of the latter is circumscribed to one of a mere teaching technician, as described by the next MT interviewed: “He stayed in the classroom, took notes, prepared something facilitated for study, prepared material as support for the test, and we checked it together. I mean, he was doing his job” (MT4-I). According to our findings, MTs tend to question the legitimacy of the STs' role as inclusion mediators by criticising disability certificates, STs' methodology in practice, and identifying them as technicians.

As a result, the STs experience a frustrating professional relationship with their MTs colleagues. A sense of isolation and of lost agency was prevalent in the discourse of the following ST interviewee:

With the MTs, the relationship was very bad. There was no relationship. [...] I was catapulted into a situation where I did not know what to do, so I did not look for a relationship with the MTs, they did not even look for one, so a complete isolation. I've always felt like I did not know what to say, what to do, what to propose. (ST9)

The social complexity around inclusion issues is heightened when the focus shifts to students. Some interviewees showed an extreme attitude by arguing that many students without certification

are borderline. In a more moderate fashion, one MT stated that students these days “need to be guided, they are less and less autonomous” (MT4-I). Similarly, an ST interviewee argues that “The girl (student with intellectual disabilities) has problems with abstraction, but even kids with normal development have difficulty today” (ST7-I). According to teachers, all students have learning disabilities nowadays, and schools are not always able to guide them.

STs motivation and value

According to MTs perspective, the recruitment methods would force many aspiring teachers to passively take up a ST role, even if they are not interested in it. In this way, the point of controversy shifts from the legitimacy of the STs’ role itself, to the motivations and professional trajectories that lead them into that role. According to an MT interviewee, STs are “kids” without experience nor motivation, who accepted to be an ST substitute for economic reasons or advancement in provincial rankings:

Have you ever seen how STs are recruited? Many of them are not actually STs, they are MTs, and because they cannot have a chair in their specialist subject, they accept ST chairs. [...] They are pretty young guys who do not have any experience and maybe aren’t even very motivated. [...] I’ve seen the difference between colleagues who do it by choice, because they want to be an ST, and kids who do it by necessity. (MT6-I)

The difference between colleagues and kids traces a symbolic boundary among colleagues whose professional trajectory is deliberate, and those who cannot be considered teachers because they are driven by necessity. During participant observation, the school principal shaped a similar boundary in conversation: “She told me that ‘a distinction must be made between those who are lifelong STs and those who enter school through an ST substitution chair.’” (DS1-O). Differently from the deliberate/instrumental scheme, here the distinction between long- and short-term teaching periods is key to interpret positive and negative attitudes towards STs career choice. It could be inferred that those STs who are taken by MTs or principals as individuals entering a school community by necessity and for a short-term period may well carry a stigma on their professional value.

To expand our argument, the notion of vocation becomes central in the discourse of another MT interviewee, who viewed teaching as a calling that transcends material needs, and involves moral feelings:

Often ST is a fallback, [...] but teaching is a job that you have to do not because you want to bring home the paycheck, but it’s kind of a calling that you feel, which is what’s right to do, even more so ST. (MT7-I)

Seen through this lens, the decision-making that leads an individual to be a ST should be traceable to pure motivations, which

transcend the material and pecuniary interests of daily life. Otherwise, STs are subjected to stigmatising judgments or, in the best scenario, to a sort of indulgent tolerance, as in the next extract from an interview with a MT: “I am biased against STs because I know that for becoming a teacher in Italy, it is the only getaway solution” (MT1-I).

The ST group? The guests

The reflection of the STs about intra-group relationships outlines a landscape of isolation among members, as mentioned above. One referred to an imagined STs community using a religious metaphor: “We are children of a lesser god” (ST3-I). Another ST interviewee described her first teaching experience in these terms: “There were other STs, but there was very little relationship, no collaboration, and everyone did very little in favour of students” (ST10-I). From interviews, it emerges a situation marked by scarce interaction and a lack of collaboration among STs. Situation that could make sense of the loss of agency incarnated in discourse, and that characterises the mode of engagement in complex caring relationships with DSs that many STs we talked to and observed must assume.

More specifically, the interaction between the tutor –an experienced ST, and the tutee in the SCST internship, in the school where ethnographic fieldwork was carried out, was describe as follows: “My tutor, when I did my internship, told me not to address the DS job opportunities topic, because I would have stolen her job” (ST11-O). In this extract, the tutor is depicted as concerned only with protecting her job when interacting with novel trainees. According to another ST, tutees come to school and do nothing (ST7-I).

In the midst of conflicting relationships with colleagues, STs’ own voice seems to fade away. During an informal meeting with ST colleagues, one of them expressed his displeasure with the lack of opportunity to discuss the intricate topic of inclusion.

It is such a big issue that is omitted [...] it is better to keep it hidden. We do not have a chance to talk, in the ST departments we do not talk anymore; just between us, we are free to express ourselves (FM-O).

As well, during a ST department meeting observed, the STs’ role became a taboo for the teachers themselves, who deliberately overlooked a reflective practice and remained silent. As said previously, some active voices make them heard during informal conversations. The fact that STs perceive that refusal to talk about inclusion – even within STs formal meetings, indicates the poor value attributed to their practices. This may well be a signal of the pervasive sense of inferiority graved into the ST discourse.

This point is clearer in the next ST interviewee’s reflection about adaptation to survive: “We need to understand that we are in an institutional context and that the important thing is to understand its rules and adapt to them” (ST8). In this conservative attitude, the key is not to break the taboo and avoid going against

the dominant view. The participant reflective process reveals a self-censuring attitude, and a silent alignment to the organisational culture.

Strategies for creating a positive identity

Despite social categorization points to something called ST group as a well-defined entity, practitioners as individuals do not self-categorise as group members, since they attribute to the ST group the negative stereotypes coming from the dominant viewpoint. The whole situation leads the individual ST to seek alternative strategies to positively symbolise their social identity. Several strategies have emerged from the participants' experiences.

The first is individual mobility. As soon as possible, STs move to the chair of their subject of specialisation; in this way, they really leave their group. When it is not possible to do so, other strategies are implemented. The second strategy is social creativity –the most frequently used among the participants of this research. STs symbolically shift the terms of comparison with MTs towards those dimensions in which they are sure they hold greater strengths than weaknesses.

The first dimension is the possession of pedagogical competencies that MTs allegedly lack. As an ST interviewee pointed out, pedagogical competencies and empathy are key elements that MTs do not have due to scarce training and knowledge (ST8-I). Another dimension is creativity, which is employed from a pedagogical-didactic perspective: “I did a lot of creative work with hands: Creativity and art allow laughing, in contrast to technology. [...] Thus, I can make progress with his [DS] educational program.” (ST1). However, creativity is also useful to manage relationships with MTs, as well as the usual uncertainty of daily school life. During ethnographic conversation, an experienced intern said that STs must have interpersonal and communication skills, be flexible and empathetic, and have reflective skills (I3-SCST). Another ST intern suggested: “The ST must be very flexible and creative to adapt to the various situations that arise in school. ST must have remarkable communication and interpersonal skills because they must interact with different MTs” (ST5-I). In this perspective, relational sensitivity and soft skills would characterise STs identity in the school context, making them different from their MT colleagues, who are perceived as primarily focused on the cognitive dimension of learning, and devoted to accomplishing with educational programs (ST8-I).

Other strategies deployed are (i) the use of documentation as a means of expressing their views, (ii) the alliance building, and (iii) a quasi-individual mobility. The Final Report, drafted by the teachers' team at the end of the school year notifying about the program and the objectives reached in favour of DSs, becomes the tool that gives back the voice to STs. It was observed how a ST shared with colleagues her strategy for drafting the Final Report: in this document, STs can add their opinions and suggestions for the following school year (FM-O). Another ST interviewee explained the importance of this document for him, after a

difficult school year due to the relationship with DS classmates and the absence of support of his MT colleagues (ST1-I).

With reference to alliance building, a participant sought to demonstrate that she was a good teacher through managing relationships with those MTs who were more sensitive to the inclusion issue. During an informal meeting with colleagues, the same participant, a ST, suggested ways to manage interactions with the MTs to gain their openness: “I believe that we must never give up. [...] We should be proactive and propose something clear. [...] We must give them clear timings and products. We must be patient and respect their pace of change” (FM-O). This participant was giving importance to the management of the emotional dimension of colleagues and the continuous effort they should make to be visible before MTs.

Finally, the individual quasi-mobility strategy has two facets. The first refers to the possibility of holding another position within the school in addition to the ST chair, for instance, a classroom coordination, as suggested by an ST (ST4-O). Similarly, when a ST occupies two chairs at the same time, one of the ST and another closer to their specialisation (ST3-I, ST4-O).

Collaboration: An oxymoronic response

Another strategy which due to its complexity has been addressed in a separate subsection, is collaboration. While it is the ultimate inclusive *modus operandi*, it encounters numerous barriers in daily practice.

An interviewed MTs attributed the lack of collaboration with his ST colleagues to the general shortage of time. He described an experience he had with an ST colleague as follows: “There was not any available time to talk about the student, so that was the problem” (MT3-O). Additionally, the shortage of time might have to do with the willingness to find the time for collaboration, as stated by another MT interviewed: “There is no time, there is also little willingness to stay at school in the afternoon. [...] The will to collaborate, that's a big problem” (MT5-O). From the point of view of a ST interviewee, there exists an absence of interest on the part of his MT colleagues to learn new topics, to interact with different teachers, and to change their way of teaching (ST8). Thus, the ST is signalling a perceived disinterest regarding educational co-responsibility in favour of DSs.

An educator mentioned her experience mediating between MTs and STs and revealed a lack of MTs' active involvement in the care relationship: “The difficult part was mediating. [...] The discrepancy between the ST, who first and foremost got involved with the student [...] and the other teachers [...] who remained apart seeing that there was the ST who first had to act” (E3-I). The different approach is a phenomenon experienced by all the educators interviewed, who only enter the school on rare, structured occasions, maximum twice a year, and form the Operational Working Group with the class teachers, the parents of DSs, the socio-medical specialists –such as psychologists, neuropsychiatrists, and social workers, who take care of students. An educator described what usually happens during these meetings:

During the Operational Working Group, MTs complain about the student not having skills, not being able to stay in the room. [...] Perhaps, teachers complain because [...] they desist and say that they cannot do anything. So, do they complain because this way they get relieved from the case? From the responsibility? (E2-I).

In this sense, another social element that characterises the interactions between the two groups being analysed is complaining. In fact, according to the interviewee, complaining has a specific goal: not taking charge of the student so that others, such as the ST and the educator, can do it.

For some MTs interviewed, the ideal profile of a DS is one that does not cause disturbance. Keeping DSs behaviour under control is perceived as critical for management and identity of MTs. One of them expressed her interest in effective management of classroom dynamics, so for her the student with a disability who “does not disrupt and sits still and quiet” allows her to manage the class and make progress with the class educational program (MT1-I). Another MT underlined her concern not only with covering the educational program, but also with cultivating her identity as a subject matter expert in front of students and the ST colleague. Consequently, as an MT interviewee said, classroom management is the governance scenario of one’s own identity.

It is difficult to manage collaboration, because on the one hand you have a ST who is used to being aside, and on the other, there are the prima donnas, a question of class management. [...] The MT prefers the ST go outside because if the former makes any mistake there is only him. There are no witnesses. (MT2-I)

Seen so, the ST may place the MT in an uncomfortable situation. According to another ST interviewee, the greatest obstacle is rooted in the MTs’ unwillingness to involve the ST, precisely because it would endanger his superiority: “No one wants to give up the power each one has accumulated in his discipline nor educational program. [...] They have a narrow, rigid mindset” (ST8-I). In this sense, a lack of dialogue and discussion characterise the relationships among teachers. It seems that only the specialist knowledge in the subject matter counts in the classroom. Thus, collaboration between MTs and STs exists only to achieve DSs’ learning goals, as one intern pointed out:

There is collaboration to achieve a learning objective, that is, to transmit knowledge. MTs are exclusively concerned with that. There is a relationship of cooperation that is also sincere, but at the same time, I see it as a contradictory, seesawing, sometimes unfair relationship. (I5-SCST)

Reflecting on this fragment, there seems to be a regret for not achieving a solid and trusting collaboration among teachers. However, as underscored by a ST interviewee, collaboration depends on organisational culture: “No one ever kind of pushed

me to be in the classroom more or integrate the DS and try some new strategies. I was starting to feel abandoned, and no help was coming from the school” (ST9-I). The interviewee felt a sense of abandonment reinforced by the conditions perceived within the educational institution. One of these is bureaucratic paperwork. Documents filled out by STs are considered time-consuming, and, from the perspective of MTs, mere sheets of paper that do not need to be read: “Bureaucracy saturates time, and no one reads the documents” (ST2-I). This further forges the participants ST’s lack of self-esteem.

Discussion

The results of this research are based on ethnographic fieldwork set in the context of a high school in an Italian province during the pandemic period, as well as semi-structured interviews with educational staff working in the same province. The triangulated results respond, fundamentally, to the context of data collection. Due to this acknowledged limitation inherent to the qualitative research design, the results do not claim to be generalisable, but we consider that they provide empirical insights and stimulate a conceptual and theoretical discussion such as the one that follows.

With the purpose of studying the ST’s social identity construction, the research highlights the role of school interactions and socio-cultural context in shaping the identity processes. It would appear that the relationship between STs and their MTs colleagues takes place within an organisational school culture and management that strongly influences the inclusive processes concerning the STs themselves. Indeed, both school culture and management policies are key elements in determining the inclusion of STs in the school in which the study took place, who experience inequality in their everyday working practice that make them feel like a guest in the school they work. As stated by [Elias and Scotson \(1965\)](#), the established group does not guarantee an automatic “inclusion” of the marginalised group, as do MTs in their daily interactions with STs. As [Zollers et al. \(1999\)](#) suggest, in order to build an environment in which inclusion is a philosophy, the school should benefit from the presence of an inclusive leadership, a broad view of the school community, and shared language and values. However, although the STs regulatory framework dates back a long time, and their role is being provided for by law and a Specialization Course for Support Teacher, the perceived legitimacy of the STs’ presence in the classroom is still an *in fieri* process.

Indeed, not only MTs would appear to not exactly know what to expect from STs and how to work with them, but also the STs co-teaching, who is part of the team of regular teachers, is perceived as unnecessary and of little value. Unlike DSs, to whom the certification provides medical-legal legitimacy, the STs interviewed do not enjoy the same benefits. Thus, the reality of these STs, while recognized, is interpreted through the lens of illegitimacy. Further, the

increase in disability certifications, interpreted as a medicalization of the student's nature (Petrina, 2006), is also perceived by the MTs not as a real need, but as a means to attend school with supporting tools, including the presence of a ST. On the other hand, according to the STs participants, regular students are fragile and need pedagogical help, like DSs; in fact, they believe their own presence is legitimate precisely to help all students in the class and to fill in the pedagogical knowledge gaps of their MT colleagues. The stigmatisation of both regular students' abilities and MTs' lack of pedagogical competencies would constitute the STs' response to legitimise their presence in the classroom and give a positive meaning to their social identity. Therefore, the social complexity of disability, together with the vague boundaries of its definition, place the two groups of teachers analysed in antithetical interpretations of the phenomena and the figure of the ST is at the antipodes of the one idealised by MTs and self-represented by the STs themselves. As Sennett (2012) points out, inferiority accentuates people's otherness, therefore, the role of the STs participants remain nebulous; since the teachers' roles are different and they do not work in close contact with each other, it would appear, from the interviews and the field observations, that what MTs know corresponds mostly to what they imagine of their ST colleagues. Therefore, it would appear that MTs and STs are not able to fully experience a reciprocal daily active listening and curiosity, i.e., the Sennettian dialogue and empathy. Thus, the two groups of teachers in this context appear to do a mutual social comparison through the lens of demerit that leads teachers to cultivate hierarchical interactions, where STs occupy a position of marginality, inferiority, and foreignness. In this respect, a parallelism can be drawn with the school context studied by Webster et al. (2010), who investigated the relationship between professionals and para-professionals. The results showed the presence of a peculiar hierarchy that is not suitable neither for the student's development nor for the two actors. The lack of training, the scarcity of time to prepare lessons, and the presence of an ambiguous role make the experience of the STs interviewed similar to that of para-professionals.

Further elements affecting the participants' identity construction of STs in relation to MTs colleagues are the motivation and values associated with their choice to pursue such a career. The social complexity of disability and inclusion, which also emerges in the literature (Mills, 2017), is also characterised by the ST recruitment system (Billingsley, 2004; Tammaro et al., 2017). Therefore, it would appear that inferiority is not only related to the individual's motivations, but also to a form of social mobility that remains the only getaway solution casting doubt on the consistency of STs professional trajectory.

The key role of the social system can also be read in Neckel (1996), who states that inferiority lies not in the individual, but in the social circumstances that construct the unequal conditions of individuals' achievement within power-based social orders,

circumstances that are subsequently attributed to individuals and groups as their deficiencies.

The above described STs representation is shared by the STs themselves, who feel guests in their workplace and do not feel to be members of the ST social group. Hence, it would appear that workplace socialisation of STs occurs through the lens of inferiority of the MT dominant group. In fact, organisational socialisation produces effects in the internalisation of organisational values and beliefs, as stated by Ashforth and Mael (1989). Additionally, as the symbolic interactionist view suggests, perceptions arise from action-in-context and social order comes from habits performed under the same interpretative frame (Mead, 1934). In accordance with Izadinia (2014), intra-group interactions play a key role in the process of identity construction and, in the case discussed here, poor intra-group interactions lead STs to mistrust their colleagues and to feel they do not have a group ready to accept them. As Izadinia (2014), group approval and acceptance are essential for self-categorization to evolve appropriately. In the present research, the lack of group-community support and collegiality undermines not only the development of a positive social identity, but also the sense of belonging to and involvement in the group. In fact, as Sennett (2011) points out, self-exclusion is linked to the low internal cohesion of the group, and people may internalise exclusion by feeling that they actually have little attraction to others, and that it is justified.

Since the STs interviewed do not feel their membership of the ST group and each ST feels unique, every single ST is committed to building their own identity by detaching themselves from the negative image of the ST group. Individuals take responsibility for rebuilding a positive social identity. Therefore, in order to rebuild a self positive image, each ST acts individually, moving away from identification with the other STs by developing different strategies (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). To find a reasonable self-image, STs have to construct a malleable and variable identity, as Sennett (2011) states when discussing the status of foreigners during exile, who seek strategies to find a reasonable image of themselves. Sennett (2012) proposes that individuals are self-exigent in today's society, because they compete with themselves and must constantly struggle to prove their worth, but no accomplishment is ever experienced as sufficiently solid evidence. The same dynamics affect the STs interviewed, who are forced to perform other roles, such as to teach also the curricular subject matter, or even becoming class coordinators. These strategies confirm and reinforce the sense of inadequacy experienced by the STs and make explicit that the ST's role would not be recognized as valuable enough to be the only one held by a teacher. Thus, STs experience a paradoxical situation, in which they want to go beyond themselves and their role to achieve a positive social identity. Additionally, STs implement other complementary strategies. For example, they describe themselves as many-facet figures

having an unique plethora of soft skills: not only pedagogical, but also relational, creative, and self-reflective qualities that would be lacking in their MT colleagues. They also seek to forge alliances with the most sensitive colleagues. However, these strategies actually maintain the hierarchical *status quo* experienced by the participants, which means STs are carrying out a cognitive restructuring of the issues of social inequality they are coping with. Finally, the most coveted strategy is individual mobility, i.e., moving to a curricular subject matter teaching role. However, it is difficult to implement this mobility, since the possibility of changing roles depends on the years of professional service and the number of teaching posts available, which are usually fewer than the teaching posts as ST. These results are reflective of a wider attitude in Italy, as discussed by [Associazione Tree LLe, Caritas Italiana e Fondazione Agnelli \(2011\)](#), who explain that STs leave for a curricular teaching post as soon as they can, because of some specific and recurring reasons: lack of support, poor collaboration with colleagues, and a sense of marginalisation. It is precisely collaboration that plays a key role in the inclusive school, as discussed in the following section.

Finally, another strategy acted out by the STs interviewed is collaboration, which is also the foundation of an inclusive school. However, the results show that collaboration is an element that is missing in daily practice and in the interactions between the teachers sampled for this study. These results are in line with previous research carried out in the Italian socio-cultural context ([Ciambrone, 2017](#)). In this regard, [Ciambrone \(2017\)](#) talks about the delegation process as a weakness of the school inclusion system in Italy. This process refers precisely to the low engagement of MTs in the care relationship with DSs and their perception of not having the necessary skills and time to collaborate with STs in the inclusion processes. The lack of collaboration inevitably leads to separation of responsibilities ([Rodríguez Rojas and Ossa Cornejo, 2014](#)); thus, the DS remains in charge of the ST only, as emerged in other school contexts ([Webster et al., 2010](#)). The ability to collaborate and integrate colleagues into the school teacher community depends on people's perceptions of their social status and that of their colleagues ([Bridwell-Mitchell and Fried, 2020](#)). The perceived STs' social status leads to a hierarchical relationship among colleagues that leads to a widespread non-collaboration and to the STs segregation.

Paradoxically, it is precisely the presence of inclusion which brings the normal-special distinction, triggering various mechanisms, including the separation of responsibility between MT and ST and the presence of the bureaucratic machine of educational management ([Skrtic, 1995](#)). Collaboration also finds obstacles at the macro level of society. [Sennett \(2012\)](#) argues that modern society has made it weak. Thus, while theoretically modern organisations are all in its favour, in practice, their structure prevents it. Additionally, the author suggests that modern work is increasingly short-term, which makes personal relationships and knowledge superficial, and, as a consequence, involvement in the organisation suffers ([Sennett, 2012](#)). Therefore, collaboration is the key element of the inclusive approach, but it

appears to be inhibited by relational, organisational, and social factors. However, it is precisely from the organisational culture that it can find new room to evolve. Concerning that point, [Sennett \(2012\)](#) identifies some elements that can facilitate collaboration: people should recognize the absence of overlapping roles and the presence of mutual interchange that benefits all the parties involved; and the presence of a complex strategic thinking that transcends the individual and their role earned over the years. As evident from the work of [Abrams et al. \(2018\)](#), intergroup relations are more likely to be good if contact is institutionally supported, and the groups have equal status. Then, both the institutional framework and the presence of spaces for the development of open and freely constructed cooperation from below are essential to legitimise collaboration ([Sennett, 2012](#)).

Some limitations can be numbered. The development of fieldwork was subjected to the health constraints associated with the management of the COVID 19 pandemic in Italy. This limited the possibility of conducting face-to-face interviews and enjoying the benefits of this form of conversation. Participant observation was also affected by changes in the dynamics and forms of everyday interaction due to physical and social distance, and the management of school capacity. Finally, being an insider researcher could lead to a loss of objectivity and bias towards interpretations and experience role conflicts; however, this status has some potential advantages, too, such as the researcher is not seen as "stranger" by the participants and therefore it is easier to gain acceptance and is already familiar with the culture.

Conclusion

The present research conducted in the secondary school educational setting focused on a particular nuance of inclusion. We examined the daily-based interactions through which the phenomenon of inclusion is experienced and how the STs' social identity is constructed within a secondary school in a northern Italy province. The participants STs' social identity is characterised by strong feelings of marginalisation and inferiority, which is learned when they enter the school as interns. It would appear that it is primarily the MT dominant group stigmatising the ST group, who in turn, loses agency. The resulting negative social identity and a low internal cohesion lead to the individual ST not identifying with the group, and instead seeking strategies to ameliorate their identity. The studied school organisational culture reinforces hierarchy through daily practices, places a different value on different types of knowledge, validates the social distance between the two groups, limits open dialogue time by prioritising bureaucratic channels, and maintains a medical approach to disability. Future research could further investigate the best practices for the educational personnel inclusion focusing on the notions of dialogue and empathy. Furthermore, it could be useful to better understand how the university SCST is organised. Finally, it would also be interesting to investigate the role of educators and psychologists, two key figures in the construction of an inclusive

network that expands educational boundaries entering the community in which the school is embedded.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

LEMM and ACJ equally contributed to the literature review, discussion, and interpretation of findings. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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