

MANAGING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS: A CHALLENGE TO TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS?

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Abstract

Managing the aggressiveness of difficult students proves to be one of the most delicate and controversial aspects in schools, due to the emotional effects it produces and the practical management that sometimes risks touching thorny legal issues. Managing problem behaviors represents the true focal point of the teaching profession, touching on personal (not always conscious) and professional aspects. The Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona collected data from seven years of training specialized support teachers, interviewing over two thousand teachers from 2016 to 2023. The use of the "TEIP" scale (Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices) highlighted the levels of efficacy towards inclusive education, which are influenced by: type of training offered by the institution; level of knowledge of legislation and educational policies on inclusion; professional and personal experience of teachers in interacting with people with disabilities (Loreman, Sharma, and Forlin, 2014). In other countries involved in the survey (Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, India, China, Finland, South Africa), these three components are always present but hold different importance depending on the culture and context in which they operate. The Italian context is no exception, but there does not yet seem to be a proactive attitude and preventive policies in this regard, although they are hoped for: often, actions are taken to address emergencies. However, from the testimonies of welcoming tutors and school principals, guidelines would be possible but are not yet formalized or official. The management of problematic and aggressive behaviors by students takes on different connotations depending on the level of education (from primary to secondary school) and the area in which one operates (urban context with good resources, problematic suburbs, rural or mountainous areas, hinterland), revealing sometimes unexpected outcomes. This research aims to present the initial results of a longitudinal study, hypothesizing new strategies in teacher training.

Keywords: In-service teacher training, inclusive teacher agency.

1 INTRODUCTION

The dimension of teacher effectiveness arises within a broader research design promoted by the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona: Italian training model for specialized support teachers was established before the reforms introduced in schools following Law 66 of 2017, which brought significant innovations in Italy regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, including the centrality of the biopsychosocial approach of the ICF. Currently, the training courses active at universities refer to the Decree of the Ministry of Education of September 30, 2011, which entrusts universities with the organization and delivery of training courses for obtaining specialization in support teaching. Since its promulgation to date, Italian universities have activated eight training cycles, and the ninth is currently underway. Thirteen years after its formulation, considering the training experiences carried out by Italian universities, including the University of Verona, the need to analyze the outcomes of this training process emerges, identifying its positive and negative aspects. The experience carried out by the University of Verona represents a significant starting point for research aimed at exploring the actual effectiveness of the training model proposed by the Ministry. The general objectives of the research program are as follows; to analyze: (i) the effectiveness of the training process for specialized support teachers in relation to the training model proposed by the Ministry; (ii) the effectiveness of the organizational model proposed by the University of Verona; (iii) the differences in terms of the effectiveness of the training process between in-person courses and distance learning courses in the years 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; (iv) the comparisons with training models for support teachers in other countries whose school systems include this role. Finally, (v) to produce evidence-based recommendations suitable for improving the organizational model of the University of Verona and, in general, the training model for specialized support teachers.

The research results regarding the comparison with other countries and the effectiveness of the organizational model have already been previously published by the same author (Corsi, 2024) and can be found in references. Here, the results of the survey on the sense of self-efficacy perceived by trained and in-training teachers from 2018 onwards are presented. Among the various factors that determine the sense of perceived self-efficacy, the most relevant one concerns the management of problem behaviors, a true educational and professional emergency that risks strongly affecting the inclusive teacher professionalism.

2 METHODOLOGY

A survey tool was created consisting of 41 questions in total, both open-ended and multiple-choice with a 6-point Likert scale. The initial part (questions 1 to 6) is demographic: it investigates the teaching cycle of the respondent, educational qualifications, age, years of service, the context of the teaching environment, and current occupation. Questions 7 to 31 are the application of the Italian version of the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale (La Marca & Di Martino, 2021), as proposed in a previous study by the University of Palermo and Catania in 2021. These are multiple-choice questions with a 6-point Likert scale. The purpose of using the tool as proposed by colleagues is twofold: to use an already validated and tested survey tool; and to overlap the statistical analysis as faithfully as possible to obtain clear feedback on emerging differences, dependent strictly on the results and not on the tool. Questions 32 to 41: qualitative evaluation with a 6-point Likert scale of the training proposal of the University of Verona. The database used was Google Forms for ease of sending, processing, and completion by the respondents. Participants from the IV edition (2018-2019) to the VIII edition (2022-2023) were contacted; of these five editions, the IV, VII, and VIII were conducted in person, while the V and VI were entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the research objectives is to determine whether there were significant differences in training effectiveness between the two modalities, considering both human aspects and the evaluation of training effectiveness in the two delivery methods. A total of 2056 teachers were involved, divided among early childhood and primary education, lower secondary education, and upper secondary education; the responses received were 648 in absolute value, corresponding to 31.52%.

Table 1. send – return report

<i>Sent Forms</i>	<i>Sent</i>	<i>returned</i>	<i>% returns</i>	
Childhood 2018	48	15	31,25	<i>In-person</i>
Primary 2018	125	40	32,00	
Middle High School 2018	125	35	28,00	
High School 2018	50	18	36,00	
Childhood 2019	26	8	30,77	<i>on-line</i>
Primary 2019	98	17	17,35	
Middle High School 2019	161	67	41,61	
High School 2019	142	34	23,94	
Childhood - Primary 2020	57	23	40,35	<i>on-line</i>
Middle High School 2020	166	87	52,41	
High School 2020	157	62	39,49	
Childhood - Primary 2021	57	14	24,56	<i>In-person</i>
Middle High School 2021	156	32	20,51	
High School 2021	274	40	14,60	
Primary 2022	52	28	53,85	<i>In-person</i>
Middle High School 2022	129	59	45,74	
High School 2022	233	69	29,61	
Total	2056	648	31,52	

The sending was done in two ways, one for the editions from IV to VI, and another for VII and VIII. Via email: (a) a message to explain the purpose of the sending and confidentiality protection: the contents were previously shared with the University's Legal Office; (b) the message contains the link to the Google Form and the QR code version, making it easily accessible from both PC and smartphone: access methods were previously tested with a sample group of 35 teachers, revealing no operational issues even with different operating systems; (c) during the sending, all addresses were put in "blind carbon copy" to ensure privacy; the message included the options "send receipt notification" and "send read notification", all with high priority to limit messages ending up in spam. Of the sent messages, only 6 failed due to non-existent or incorrect email addresses. For editions VII and VIII, the Form was sent at the end of the course through the Moodle platform as an integral part of the study material.

The concept of Teacher's Efficacy, "originates from Albert Bandura's Socio-Cognitive Theory (1986), which postulates the existence of a constant dynamic interaction between personal factors (including beliefs, perceptions, and expectations), behavioral factors, and environmental factors, hypothesizing that individual behavior determines and is determined by this reciprocal triadic causation" (Aiello, P., Sibilio, M., 2016). Indeed, given the same training proposal, its application and effectiveness are strongly influenced by the environment in which teachers operate. Teacher efficacy is a context-influenced construct and should be measured in relation to specific teaching activities and in specific classroom and school-community contexts. The analysis proposed evaluates the sense of self-efficacy in comparison with the testimonies of headmasters and welcoming tutors from the various institutions where the teachers completed their training. Headmasters and welcoming tutors were contacted through an informal interview aimed at returning the results of the questionnaires: since these interviews are revealing aspects previously not considered in the research project (characteristics of the territory and its inhabitants, relationships with family members, etc.), targeted interviews will be structured in a further phase of the research.

3 RESULTS

In this analysis, two clusters are considered. Cluster 1: "relationship with families"; Cluster 2: "management of problem behaviors". For statistical validity, the reliability coefficient alpha is calculated, which is considered acceptable if it is above 0.70 (Amaturo, Grassia, Lauro, Marino, 2021). This index is calculated:

$$\alpha = \frac{M \cdot r}{1 + (M - 1) \cdot r}$$

where: M is the number of items; r: average of the correlations between pairs of items

3.1 Cluster analysis

3.1.1 Cluster 1: relationship with families

The questions considered in this cluster: question 1 "I can make parents feel comfortable at school"; question 2 "I can help families help their children do well in school"; question 3 "I am confident in my ability to involve parents in school activities concerning their children with special educational needs". The table shows the values of the arithmetic mean; the editions numbered 19 and 20 were online, the others were in person.

Table 2. arithmetic means with maximum (blue) and minimum (red)

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
C 18	5,00	4,73	4,93
C 19	4,83	5,00	4,67
C-P 20	4,68	4,50	4,73
C-P 21	5,21	5,07	5,14
C-P 22	5,14	4,93	5,07
P18	4,74	4,97	4,87
P19	5,06	4,94	5,13
MHS 18	5,00	4,75	4,88
MHS 19	5,05	4,83	4,93

MHS 20	5,11	4,94	4,83
MHS 21	5,00	5,03	4,81
MHS 22	4,98	4,68	4,63
HS18	5,29	5,00	4,88
HS 19	4,90	4,68	4,65
HS 20	4,92	4,58	4,45
HS 21	5,00	4,88	4,78
HS 22	4,93	4,59	4,55

The reliability index α recalculated for this grouping is 0.794: it is considered reliable. As can be seen from the questions semantic, it starts from a general situation (making parents feel comfortable), then focuses on the helping relationship (“helping to help”), and concludes with an active involvement in concrete activities related to situations of special need.

Distribution does not show a correlation between relationships with family members in relation to the school cycle: from the point of view of professional quality of life, working in early childhood-primary rather than high school does not show significant variations in terms of relationships with families. This partly debunks the myth that parents of young children are more apprehensive and demanding towards the teaching staff compared to later cycles. Two elements stand out: (i) the minimum values of the two questions are present in the “early childhood-primary” cycle, 2020 edition, online edition; (ii) the maximum values in the “early childhood-primary 2021” cycle, in person. Most likely, the sense of perceived self-efficacy depended on the training mode: online attendance did not allow for effective experimentation in the relationship. Are there significant correlations between the dimensions of “chronological age” and “length of service” in relation to relationships with families? The following table shows interesting observational data: older teachers by chronological age teach younger children; younger teachers are found in high schools; length of service follows a similar trend, with few deviations.

Table 3. comparison between cluster's questions, age and length of service

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Average chronological age	Average years of service
C 18	5,00	4,73	4,93	44,67	16,74
C 19	4,83	5,00	4,67	48,75	14
C-P 20	4,68	4,50	4,73	39,41	5,36
C-P 21	5,21	5,07	5,14	45,43	4,79
C-P 22	5,14	4,93	5,07	39,25	4,5
P18	4,74	4,97	4,87	42,18	7,24
P19	5,06	4,94	5,13	44,86	7,69
MHS 18	5,00	4,75	4,88	41,21	7,82
MHS 19	5,05	4,83	4,93	41,02	5,92
MHS 20	5,11	4,94	4,83	40,06	5,46
MHS 21	5,00	5,03	4,81	39,47	5,22
MHS 22	4,98	4,68	4,63	37,27	5,28
HS18	5,29	5,00	4,88	39,95	5,11
HS 19	4,90	4,68	4,65	40,26	5,44
HS 20	4,92	4,58	4,45	37,72	4,95
HS 21	5,00	4,88	4,78	39,13	4,58
HS 22	4,93	4,59	4,55	38,49	5,81

A correlation evaluation (Pearson's χ^2) is carried out, where the index ranges from -1 to +1, with -1 indicating a perfect negative correlation (as one dimension increases, the other decreases with perfect causality); +1 indicating a perfect positive correlation (as one dimension increases, the other increases with perfect causality); and 0 indicating no correlation, meaning the two variables are completely independent. Here are the findings:

Table 4. evaluation of correlation

		χ^2
I can make parents feel comfortable at school	Chronological age	0,005
I can make parents feel comfortable at school	Length of service	-0,219
I can help families help their children do well in school	Chronological age	0,496
I can help families help their children do well in school	Length of service	0,039
I am confident in my ability to involve parents in school activities concerning their children with special educational needs	Chronological age	0,062
I am confident in my ability to involve parents in school activities concerning their children with special educational needs	Length of service	0,452

Possible explanations: the correlation between “making parents feel comfortable” and “chronological age” has a very low index; the average age of teachers does not significantly affect compliance towards parents, except in a negligible way (0.005). Hiring younger or older teachers does not indicate better or worse relationships with families. Instead, this correlation becomes significantly relevant (0.496) when the teacher focuses on caring for the children, a very clear keyword used in the semantics of the question, “helping to help”. The interesting aspect that can be inferred is that the dimension of empathy aimed at a purpose significantly affects the care of students, as a filial dimension. Years of service are negatively correlated (-0.219) with the ability to make parents feel comfortable at school: more years of service, less attention seems to be paid to welcoming parents. While: years of service positively affects supporting families in helping their children succeed at school. There could be many possible considerations from the perspective of inferential statistics: from the perspective of family members, a parent probably perceives dissonant elements between the treatment reserved for them, the relationships with the school in relation to the age and years of experience of the teachers. This is why it would be interesting to proceed with research investigating the quality of relationships from the parents' perspective, how they perceive themselves in relation to the school institution and from the perspective of educational co-responsibility. Regarding the dimension of self-confidence, chronological age shows a negligible correlation (0.062), while the dimension of acquired experience and years of service is decisive (0.452); the data is consistent with some testimonies reported by welcoming tutors: inclusive teachers in training who have a career behind them (even if as temporary workers or in other educational services for minors) unanimously demonstrate greater effectiveness.

3.1.2 Cluster 2: management of problem behaviors

This is one of the most delicate and controversial aspects of research, due to the emotional effects it produces and the concrete management that sometimes risks touching thorny legal issues. The management of problem behaviors represents the real nerve center of the teaching profession, touching personal (not always conscious) and professional aspects. According to the TEIP scale, the levels of efficacy towards inclusive education are influenced by: (i) the type of training offered by the institution; (ii) the level of knowledge of the regulations and educational policies on inclusion; (iii) the professional and personal experience of teachers in interacting with people with disabilities (Loreman, Sharma, and Forlin, 2014). In the countries involved in the survey (Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, India, China, Finland, South Africa), the three components are always present but have different importance depending on the reference culture and context. The Italian context is no exception, but there still does not seem to be an attitude and projective or preventive policies in this regard (as much as they are hoped for): often action is taken by facing the emergency. Yet, from the testimonies of welcoming tutors and headmasters, guidelines would be possible, for now not formalized or officialized. Let's look at the data in detail: the cluster of this part of the questionnaire includes six items to which the trainee teachers gave a rating from 1 to 6. Question 1 “I am able to enforce classroom rules to students”; question 2 “I am confident when dealing with students who are physically aggressive”; question 3 “I can effectively respond to students who have an insolent attitude”; question 4 “I can contain disruptive behavior in the classroom”; question 5 “I am confident in my ability to prevent disruptive behaviors in the classroom before they occur”; question 6 “I am able to calm a student who is annoying or noisy”. Below is the table of average values, organized in chronological order by school cycle (from early childhood and primary school in 2018 to high school in 2022). The α calculated for this grouping is 0.91, which is considered reliable.

Table 5. questions of cluster 2 (mean values: red is minimum, blue is maximum)

	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6
C 18	4,53	4,40	4,40	4,53	4,33	4,60
C 19	4,67	4,83	4,17	4,33	4,50	5,17
C-P 20	4,18	3,73	4,32	4,14	3,73	4,32
C-P 21	4,79	4,43	4,71	4,57	4,64	4,93
C-P 22	4,79	3,89	4,50	4,68	4,46	4,68
P18	4,92	4,68	4,71	4,37	4,50	4,71
P19	4,88	4,50	4,81	4,81	4,88	5,13
MHS 18	4,47	4,09	4,47	4,19	4,44	4,53
MHS 19	4,40	3,74	4,28	4,17	4,28	4,34
MHS 20	4,59	4,05	4,47	4,42	4,42	4,63
MHS 21	4,59	4,25	4,59	4,41	4,41	4,59
MHS 22	4,17	3,75	4,31	4,22	4,25	4,49
HS18	4,82	3,82	4,71	4,41	4,29	4,29
HS 19	4,61	3,55	4,16	4,32	4,23	4,29
HS 20	4,27	3,32	4,17	4,20	4,17	4,20
HS 21	4,53	4,18	4,33	4,35	4,48	4,63
HS 22	4,57	4,00	4,43	4,39	4,38	4,42

Let's proceed with some observations of descriptive and inferential statistics: visually, the maximum values in terms of self-efficacy in managing problem behavior are distributed in the Early Childhood and Primary cycle, where there are also minimum values but referred to a specific edition, the Early Childhood-Primary 2020, attended online. The minimum values are recorded in high schools, with the absolute minimum (3.32) for the item "I am confident when dealing with students who are physically aggressive" related to the secondary school 2020. The same specialization class also reports a relative minimum (4.20) in the item "I am able to calm a student who is annoying or noisy". The emerging data suggest inferences that subsequent levels of statistical analysis have partially confirmed: (a) the 2020 was the last online edition due to the pandemic, it suffered particularly due to the "remote" mode; (b) the data were compared with what was reported by the welcoming tutors, data that are reported in the next sections related to a first discussion.

3.1.3 Discussion: The reality of mountain schools

For schools in mountain areas, welcoming tutors report, "Here there is a low population density, families and the teaching staff generally know each other. Mountain people are naturally distrustful of outsiders (cit.) but there is great trust in the school. Therefore: interns, even if they come from outside, have generally been well received by families. It must be said that the interns present here have always done an excellent job, both in terms of skills and educational innovation, and in terms of relationships with families and students. Problematic children here are known to everyone: those who behave strangely at school come from families, known and recognized, of cultural and material poverty. In this sense, the school is a faithful representation of the surrounding society. Managing a problem's behavior is almost never a novelty: problematic children are socially known, albeit informally, and action can be taken well in advance. In the mentality of mountain people, often everything is known about everyone, even in an undue manner; those labeled as "strange" often risk carrying the stigma. However, the general climate is one of great collaboration."

3.1.4 Discussion: The reality of rural schools.

Welcoming tutors report: "Inclusive teachers in training who have passed through here in the last five years have had mixed experiences: from very skilled professionals to situations that we would not want or see doing the teacher's job. One of the discriminating values is age: those who are very young and have taken the specialized teacher course immediately after graduation have a certainly updated theoretical background, especially in terms of technological innovation, but little ability to manage problematic situations and little incisiveness regarding innovation and inclusion. On the other hand, teachers of a different age (forty years or older), perhaps coming from other previous professions, have

proven to be very effective. The students are varied because the population's background is varied: from those who have always lived here for generations to those who have arrived here from the city because they inherited houses and land from relatives and have nothing in common with the rural reality of the place. Therefore, the relationship between students with problem behaviors and their families is varied and complex. It became evident the scarcity of relational resources of the editions carried out online: they did not arrive adequately prepared in terms of managing relational dynamics. A suggestion from us would be to provide highly experiential workshops (such as psychodrama with theater simulations) where certain realities are simulated and experienced as realistically as possible".

3.1.5 Discussion: Primary and middle high school in the city.

Welcoming tutors report: "the reality of primary and middle high school students is very varied, with families from extremely heterogeneous cultural and economic backgrounds. Interns present here in the last two years have demonstrated great theoretical and technological update skills, but poor ability to put them into practice (thus, to relate with), both with the students entrusted to them and with the teaching staff. Relational difficulties appear due to the lack of self-observation and self-questioning. Experiential workshops (psychodrama, or others) would be important to learn how to manage complex and often difficult dynamics".

3.1.6 Discussion: High school in the city

Welcoming tutors report: "being a technical institute, the number of enrolled students is very high (over a thousand), and there are problematic students: often with social difficulties (followed by social services) and outcomes of school dropout. In case of problem behaviors, we are among those schools where parents arrive with a lawyer. Not one, but two! In these cases, the reality is surprisingly simple: those who arrive with a lawyer are in situations where there has been no clarity in the relationships between teachers, school, and family. It does not depend on the severity of the act itself, but on the relationships that have been built, or not. To be honest, those who arrive with a lawyer are right: it means that, as an institution, we have not been clear and have not built a coherent relationship of educational co-responsibility with families. The presence of the lawyer frequently serves to bring clarity that has not been there from the beginning".

4 CONCLUSIONS

In a first summary: the sense of self-efficacy regarding the management of problem behaviors seems to be greatly influenced by the fear of legal retaliation. It is a matter of understanding whether it is a concrete danger or a bias that creates constraints in the absence of a real danger. An interesting question would be to ask the Provincial School Office for the number of actual ongoing proceedings.

In any case, from the point of view of perceived self-efficacy, there is a fairly predictable trend; returning to the numbers of descriptive statistics: if an arithmetic mean is taken of all the questions in this cluster by teaching classes, the highest average value is referred to the Early Childhood and Primary cycle (4.54), it drops to 4.33 for Middle High School, and reaches a minimum of 4.28 for High School. Nothing surprising: it is easier to manage the outbursts of young children rather than those of adolescents. However, the data cannot be dismissed with this simplification: while it is plausible for the Early Childhood-Primary cycle (the standard deviation assumes minimum values of 0.20), this is not the case for High School where the standard deviation rises to 0.36, with greater data dispersion. This is not the place to delve deeper, but it would legitimately suggest that the relationship between adolescents and school is more complex than a statistical inference might convey. Confirmation comes from the evaluation of the same statistical dispersion regarding the item "I am confident when dealing with students who are physically aggressive", whose value is the highest of all the items in the cluster. This area could also be influenced by a halo effect: it reports the highest standard deviation but a surprisingly high Pearson correlation index. The correlation between the matrices "I am confident when dealing with students who are physically aggressive" vs. "average value of perceived self-efficacy" reports a value of 0.87 (with 1 as the maximum, in positive correlation); while the lowest correlation index belongs to the item "I can effectively respond to students who have an insolent attitude", with a value of 0.71.

Assuming that "insolence" literally means a state of verbal aggression, it seems possible to partially conclude that physical aggression is the most feared, but rarely occurs; to the extent that it manifests, there are elements to contain it. Verbal violence is the one that manifests most frequently, towards which one feels less effective and prepared. This hypothesis could open a whole new chapter of research, analyzing the evolution of adolescent language, even in its less edifying aspects.

In short: the teacher who is physically assaulted ends up in social media, the one who is insulted does not. The former makes more news, although it is very rare. These initial partial results seem to be in line with recent research by Simone (Simone, M.G., 2024), which highlights that the relational skills of the specialized support teacher can “early identify the typical discomfort of the many and growing situations of social malaise and existential marginality in the school that risk escaping the lens of special education (Simone, 2024, pg 217)”. The reference is to all those situations that do not have a medical diagnosis but manifest as difficulties in the affective, social, and/or relational sphere that come from territorial or family fragilities. In Special Pedagogy, this is a known concept, that of S.E.N. (special education needs), but it is still poorly considered with due attention, or it is taking on new connotations that should be explored.

The specialization class that appears to be the most suffering in the analysis of these clusters is the high school edition 2020: the last of the online editions due to the pandemic. The analysis of kurtosis did not show substantial variations and, analyzing the minutes of the returned questionnaires, the values are all generally low. Considering that this group responded to the survey almost two years after the end of the training (in any case, after the probationary year), the data show an edition with poor or scarce relational strategies for managing problem behaviors; if the numbers for each item are compared with the previous edition of 2019 (also online), it can be noted that the numbers are very similar. Instead, they increase significantly in the subsequent editions of 2021 and 2022, in which in-person training was resumed: it seems possible to conclude that the online edition penalized the trainee teachers specifically in the acquisition of relational strategies and skills. Being online, there was no way to experiment directly, more effectively, and in a group dimension.

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