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**The role of the tutor in the inclusive teacher internship: a competence-based curriculum**

**Il ruolo del tutor nel tirocinio del docente inclusivo: un curriculum competence-based**

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ABSTRACT

*The paper illustrates the curriculum design aimed at training tutors for students on the Specialisation Course for Support Activities (CdS). The CUAP Expert in Inclusive Practices in Educational Contexts was developed by the University of Turin to respond to the need to train new tutors, which had become urgent following an increase in the number of places available in the CdS. The organisation of the CUAP provided the opportunity to take advantage of the competences acquired in the previous editions of the CdS and to propose a competence-based course, designed on the basis of the competences expected of an expert tutor and divided into five interdependent areas of competence: professional, communicator, leader and collaborator, researcher and trainer, activist and promoter. The article shows how the critical incident technique helps professionals to reflect on their own practices and identify mobilised or required competences.*

**Keywords:** tutor expert, inclusion, curriculum design, competence, reflective practice.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of the joint work of the authors who were involved in the conception and implementation of the training course and in the drafting of the text. In particular, Alessandro Monchietto wrote paragraphs 1, 2, 3 and 6, while Diego Di Masi wrote paragraphs 4 and 5.

## RIASSUNTO

*Il contributo illustra la progettazione di un corso finalizzato alla formazione di tutor per il tirocinio all'interno del Corso di specializzazione per le attività di sostegno didattico agli alunni con disabilità (CdS). Il CUAP "Esperto nei processi di inclusione scolastica e nella formazione in situazione" è stato sviluppato dall'Università di Torino per rispondere all'esigenza di formare nuovi tutor, resasi impellente in seguito all'incremento dei posti disponibili nel CdS. L'organizzazione del CUAP ha rappresentato un'opportunità per valorizzare le competenze maturate nelle precedenti edizioni del CdS e per proporre un percorso Competency-based progettato a partire dalle competenze attese da un tutor esperto, articolato in cinque aree di competenza interdipendenti: Professionista, Comunicatore, Leader e Collaboratore, Formatore e Ricercatore, Attivista (CANMED, 2015). L'articolo si conclude con l'analisi e la discussione dei testi riflessivi elaborati dai corsisti.*

*Parole chiave:* Tutor esperto, Inclusione, Progettazione curricolare, Competenze, Pratiche riflessive.

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## 1. BRIDGING THE GAP: THE NEED FOR STRUCTURED TUTOR TRAINING IN TEACHER INDUCTION PROGRAMS

In recent years, literature has emphasised the central role of tutors in the training of newly recruited teachers and the importance of specific training for these professionals (Fiorucci & Moretti, 2019). The focus on the tutor's competences is in line with the increasing attention paid to the quality of mentoring during the induction phase, which is considered crucial for an effective and reflective integration of new teachers into the school environment (Balconi et al., 2020; Capperucci, 2018; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). The mentoring function, which is understood as support for both professional and personal development, requires specific relational and methodological competences (Heilbronn et al., 2002; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Peer learning, in particular, has been shown to be a fundamental training strategy that enables the development of a community of practice centred on the sharing of experiences and critical dialogue (Alessandrini, 2019; Ulvik & Smith, 2011). However, the literature shows a significant discrepancy between the structured training programmes offered to newly recruited teachers and the programmes for tutors, which are often fragmented and of short duration (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Fiorucci & Moretti, 2024).

At the international level, well-founded experiences in countries such as Norway and Israel have led to reflections on the professionalisation of the tutoring role, emphasising the need for a specific professional profile with ethical guidelines and clear frameworks (Ulvik & Smith, 2011). In Italy, recent regulations (D.M. 850/2015 and L. 107/2015) have also attempted to formalise the role of tutors by assigning them tasks such as supervision and assisting in the competence assessment of newly recruited teachers (Magnoler, 2018). Despite these efforts, it is evident that there is a lack of systematic and continuous training programmes to strengthen these competences (Guerra, 2018).

## 2. INTERNSHIPS FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING: DEVELOPING SKILLS IN SPECIAL NEEDS TEACHER TRAINING

The role of the internship tutor is particularly important in the Specialisation course for support

activities (CdS), a university program designed to prepare teachers for the inclusive education model introduced in Italy. Unlike other countries, Italy has adopted a one-track approach to inclusion, which ensures that all students are taught together in mainstream classes, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. At the heart of this model is the role of the support teacher, who is required by law for every student with disability. These professionals are co-teachers in their assigned classes and work closely with other educators to promote the full inclusion of students with disabilities in all educational and social activities.

To become a certified support teacher, candidates must complete the CdS, a university specialization pathway comprising 1,500 hours (equivalent to 60 ECTS) of structured training (D.M. 30/09/2011). The training consists of a combination of theoretical classes, practical laboratories and, above all, an extensive internship (Figure 1). The internship is divided into three different components: direct internship activities, indirect internship activities and a segment dedicated to the use of communication and information technologies (Teruggi, Cinotti, & Farina, 2021; Zappaterra, 2016).

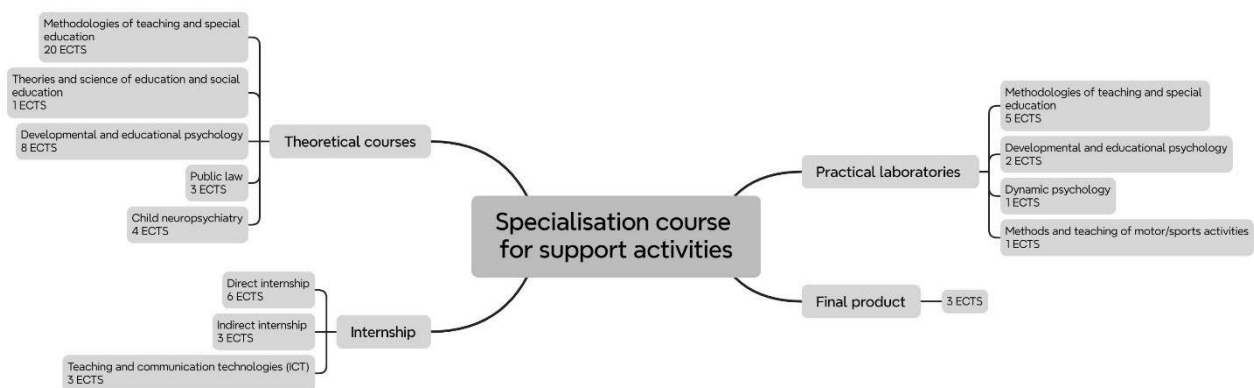


Figure 1 - Course structure, academic disciplines involved and ECTS credits. Adapted from Calvani et al., 2017

Within this framework, trainee teachers are placed in real school contexts under the supervision of an experienced tutor as part of the direct placement, giving them the opportunity to immerse themselves in daily pedagogical practices and gain practical experience in inclusive classrooms. Far from being purely observational, the internship is designed to encourage a reflective approach to professional practice. Tutees are guided by tutors who not only model inclusive teaching strategies, but also encourage active participation and engagement with the complex dynamics of the classroom.

Conversely, the indirect practicum provides a reflective space where knowledge gained in theoretical courses and labs is integrated through the guidance of university-based internship tutors, known as “coordinator tutors”. These tutors, appointed by the university, play a central role in facilitating reflection sessions where tutees can critically analyse their experiences. This dual approach ensures that tutees develop both the technical skills and reflective competencies required to support the learning of all students in an inclusive environment (Valenza & Gianfagna, 2014). By linking theoretical knowledge and practical application, practicum tutors contribute to the professionalisation of teacher education and ensure a high quality introduction to inclusive teaching practice (Torre, 2006).

### 3. DEVELOPING EXPERT SUPERVISORS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE CUAP INITIATIVE

Given the crucial role that internship supervisors play in the training of support teachers, it became clear that a structured and specialised training programme was needed to adequately prepare these professionals. This need led to the development of the CUAP course entitled *Expert in Inclusive Practices in Educational Contexts*. The course was designed and implemented by the Department of Philosophy and Education of the University of Turin to respond to the increasing demand for qualified university teachers to support the growing number of students enrolled in CdS (Covelli, Sánchez Utgé, & Moliterni, 2021).

The CUAP course was established through a cooperation agreement between key institutions, including the University of Turin, the Regional Government of Piedmont, the Regional School Board and various local educational institutions. The aim of this partnership was to promote a culture of inclusion based on a collective commitment to implement systemic actions that would improve the training of support teachers and facilitate their effective integration into the school environment (Covelli & De Anna, 2021). Consequently, the course was structured to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience, following the Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) model. This model provides course participants with a foundation for professional practice by clearly defining the competences required to meet the concrete challenges in different professional contexts (Burke, 2005).

The CUAP course consisted of 100 hours of blended learning and included both general course content and workshops that encouraged collaboration and sharing of best practices among participants. By providing a comprehensive training pathway for future internship supervisors, the CUAP programme aims to ensure that these educators are well prepared to take on the dual role of guiding tutees in their professional development while actively promoting a culture of inclusion in schools (Di Masi *et al.*, 2023).

### 4. ROLES AND COMPETENCES OF THE EXPERT TUTOR: THE DESIGN OF THE CUAP COURSE

The experience gained during the previous editions of the CdS highlighted the need to invest in the training of tutor-coordinators in order to develop a common model for indirect internships (Maccario, 2014). This training should focus not only on tutors' prior experiences, but also on embedding them in a structured theoretical framework and clarifying the underlying theories and practices. The self-evaluation of tutor coordinators training (e.g. SSIS/TFA - courses to prepare new teachers for secondary education), CdS and Primary Education Sciences, as well as national research initiatives such as A.Pr.Ed. (Analysis of Educational Practices) have contributed to a collective rethinking of the role of the tutor coordinator. Over the years, this model has evolved, moving from a purely experiential approach to one enriched with conceptual tools that define an "action space" where the expertise of the supervising tutor meets the evolving professionalism of the tutee (Cerri, 2014; Massaro, 2015).

The design of the CUAP course was based on two complementary processes. The first, a bottom-up approach, consisted of integrating the tutors' experiences from previous editions of the teacher training courses. This collaboration between tutors and academics made it possible to develop a coherent training programme that meets the challenges of practise.

The second step, from the top down, involved the definition of a theoretical model to guide the training. The model chosen was based on the CanMEDS framework for the medical field (Frank *et*

*al.*, 2015; Surian & Di Masi, 2017), which defines the key competencies of an expert professional. For expert tutors, these areas are defined as the roles of Professional, Communicator, Leader and Collaborator, Researcher and Trainer, and Activist for inclusion (Figure 2). For each role, a working group consisting of experienced tutors, faculty members from the Department of Philosophy and Education and staff from the Postgraduate Office of the University of Turin identified the required competencies based on a bottom-up analysis of previous tutoring practice.



Figure 2 - Areas of Expert Tutor Competence (revised and adapted from CanMEDS, 2015)

This framework is not intended as a prescriptive model of what an expert tutor “should be”. Rather, it is a dynamic approach aimed at continuous improvement, moving from current practices to improved professional standards. The roles and key competencies identified are interlinked and flexible to enable tutors to respond effectively to different and evolving situations in the context of inclusive education.

Specific modules were developed for each of these roles as part of the CUAP course, totaling 100 hours of training and aimed at improving tutors’ skills in supporting both tutee teachers and the wider inclusion process (Figure 3). In the Professional role, for example, the focus was on promoting inclusion and the wellbeing of teachers and students through the application of ethical and professional standards. The course emphasised that professionalism involves not only technical expertise, but also a commitment to the principles of inclusion and responsibility in decision making (Verkerk *et al.*, 2006).

The CUAP course’s emphasis on defining and developing these roles was instrumental in ensuring that internship tutors were not only technically proficient, but also reflective and adaptive. This multi-faceted approach to tutor training meets the evolving needs of inclusive education and equips tutors with the necessary skills and attitudes to effectively mentor tutee teachers and contribute to the creation of an inclusive, supportive and dynamic school environment.

The expert tutor roles: training activities	
<b>Introduction</b>	The training model: the expert tutor (CanMEDs)
<b>Professional</b>	The cultural dimension of internship. Legislation and organization of the course
	Internship location matching: methods and criteria
	Ethical and professional standards for tutors
	Internship tools: documentation, journal and observation matrices
	Design of Learning Units and final report
<b>Communicator</b>	Communicative styles in adult learning
	Construct inclusive contexts through linguistic education
	Mediation and conflict management
	Narrative tools to promote participation
<b>Researcher and Trainer</b>	Principles and approaches in adult education
	Methods and techniques in adult education
	Supervision in education: professional reflexivity in the relationship between theory and practice
	Peer observation, critical friend and analysis of critical/significant events
	Evidence-based, evaluation and documentation of teaching and learning practices
<b>Leader and Collaborator</b>	Thinking and acting in a systemic perspective: facilitating learning in organisations
	Teamwork and group dynamics in complex organisations
	How to activate, organise and manage GLOs and GLIs
	The use of ICT in tutoring practices
<b>Activist</b>	Inclusive principles and values in tutoring
	Constructing community: learning about local resources and opportunities
	Individual, tailored and participated life project
	RAV, PTOF, PAI, Area Plan, Programme Agreement
	Designing inclusive class-based learning courses
<b>Final product</b>	Education on stage: the representation of tutoring through the methodology of theatre

Figure 3 - The expert tutor roles and the corresponding training activities designed within the CUAP program

For reasons of space, in this chapter we only present the key competencies in connection with the role of the Communicator (Figure 4). The competences presented in the table represent an initial framework developed in collaboration with the educators involved in tutor training; it should therefore be considered as a preliminary proposal for further development. The communicator tutor facilitates a student-centred, pedagogical dialogue by recognising and nurturing each student's unique potential, learning strategies, and experiences. Through active listening and consideration of the student's personal, socio-economic and educational background, the tutor develops a shared understanding that informs decision making. This collaborative approach allows for tailored support that is aligned with the student's needs, values and aspirations. As barriers to education often affect both students and their families, the tutor as communicator must engage effectively with all parties involved to create a supportive environment for the student's educational journey.



ROLES	DEFINITION	KEY COMPETENCES <sup>2</sup>
<b>Communicator</b>	The communicator tutor promotes a tutee-centred dialogue that respects individual backgrounds and needs. He/she helps the tutee in developing activities aimed at involving students and their families in shared decision making to support learning. The tutor's approach involves active listening and effective communication to address educational challenges collaboratively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build a formative relationship with the tutee that focuses on professional development</li> <li>• Be aware in the relationship with the tutee, of one's own and others' communicative style: verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal language</li> <li>• Support the tutee in observing and gathering information needed to create an IEP, including the perspectives of students and their families</li> <li>• Helps the tutee in developing activities aimed at involving students and their families in the development of an IEP that reflects the educational needs and desires of the student</li> <li>• Support the tutee in understanding the context, its dynamics and potential for change</li> <li>• Document and share the inclusive processes to evaluate the student's development in a formative perspective and support the decision-making process.</li> <li>• Develop proactive strategies to manage potential conflicts with colleagues, students and families</li> <li>• Design an artefact to mediate the communicative dynamics</li> </ul>

Figure 4 - The key competences of the Communicator tutor

Based on the theoretical framework provided by the model of the expert tutor in inclusive processes, the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used to reflect on the different roles involved. This strategy was implemented in two different ways within the CUAP program. Firstly, it was introduced as part of the module on internship tools in the role of "Researcher and Trainer"; in this context, the technique was introduced to participants as a methodological resource to promote reflective practice and analytical skills. Secondly, the technique was used by indirect internship tutors during the CdS. Here, it was used as a tool to guide students in analyzing significant or disruptive events they encountered during their direct internship experiences in the schools and to develop communication skills for managing potential conflicts with colleagues.

We present here an excerpt from a discussion based on a critical incident in a school to illustrate how tutor-guided reflection and dialogue can highlight the different competencies that have been (or can potentially be) mobilized to effectively manage the critical incident.

## 5. CRITICAL EVENT

The critical incident technique was used in the CUAP to provide participants with a tool to support participants in analysing the competencies that occur or could arise when dealing with events that

<sup>2</sup> The table is the result of the joint work of C. Berretta, D. Di Masi, A. Monchietto and M. Seira Ozino, who collaborated on the design and implementation of the CUAP training course.

disrupt daily routines. Below is the discussion that emerged from a significant incident in an early childhood education context.

*K. is a two-year-old boy. His right leg is affected by a genetic dysplasia that has serious consequences for his mobility. His parents have ruled out the use of orthopaedic supports as they are waiting for an operation in the USA. According to his parents, the doctors believe that a full recovery of the leg is possible. While the other children are starting to walk, K. has to crawl to be able to move independently. K. has experienced full participation at lunch and bedtime, but during the other activities, new questions about inclusion arise.*

*During a simple and quiet activity with the sheets, organized by the teacher to include K, the other children start to pick up the strips of paper and carry them around or tear them up and scatter them like confetti. While other activities that are considered less accessible for K, such as running in the garden or following a trail on the ground, K can show unexpected abilities.*

This event highlights what the professionals involved have identified as a paradox:

“This critical incident demonstrates a paradox: in the movement activity where K could potentially be excluded, he managed to participate by finding alternative strategies, whereas the simpler activity designed by the educators to encourage his participation did not work as expected” (professional).

This paradox emphasises an aspect that is often implicit in inclusion-oriented practices: the dichotomy between “special” and “normal” (Ianes, Demo, 2024), which is referred to in the literature as the “dilemma of difference” (Norwich, 2008).

As Norwich (2008) explains, the term “dilemma” often appears in educational policy, theory and research to denote challenges or problematic situations. In these cases, the “dilemma” arises when we are faced with a choice between two unfavourable alternatives; it implies a logical opposition in which the terms cannot coexist without invalidating each other. However, when dealing with human activity Engeström (2016) claims that we often find not only dilemmas but also contradictions in the context of human activities. In contrast to dilemmas, contradictions reflect a structural tension embedded in a system of activity or multiple systems, an underlying structural tension that is historically and socially embedded and sustains the productive potential for growth.

In this context, contradictions cannot necessarily be eliminated. They embody positive and negative forces that coexist and shape and drive change and development within the system. Such contradictions are productive: they provide a foundation for new ways of thinking and acting, especially in complex educational environments where students have different needs and capacities. In an educational setting, contradictions do not require a decision that negates one of the alternatives. Rather, they challenge educators to creatively integrate seemingly contradictory elements into a coherent approach that evolves with the system.

The persistence of the “special” model in our schools leads to the paradox presented in the critical incident. The educator’s approach becomes narrowly focused on the child’s functional profile. As one educator noted, this decision reflects the adults’ underlying perception of disability, which in turn shapes their practises:

“The idea of inclusion that emerges is to avoid situations that appear difficult for the child in the adult’s representation. Faced with an impairment, the adult tries to create a protective context to prevent the child from getting into a problematic situation, even if it may have been the situation



the child was looking for” (professional).

Another educator introduces an additional perspective that challenges conventional assumptions by using the critical incident to bring to light – and thus challenge – an implicit assumption about movement:

“Movement is not just jumping or running but also crawling and rolling. We need a broad idea of movement, what do we have in mind when we talk about movement?” (professional).

The critical incident not only prompted the teacher to review her approach and take a critical look at her perspectives, but also provided an opportunity to reflect on the relationship with the family.

“Then there’s another problem: the attitude of parents who do not want to use orthopaedic support. They can go to the US and spend a lot of money, but they will come back with the same problem and we will have lost time” (professional).

A contrast emerges between the perspectives of the family and the school, which is reinforced by the lack of recognition of each other’s expectations. The school’s attitude is initially characterised by a critical view of the family’s decisions, which, according to the teacher, are influenced by the medical professionals’ approach.

“The doctors have a healthy child in mind, the teachers have a happy child” (professional).

This conflict highlights a dichotomy: health versus happiness. However, this dichotomy was ultimately overcome by recognising the legitimacy of the family’s hope and the role that school can play in supporting that hope.

“Parents rightly cling to any hope, and we need to acknowledge their hope, listen to them and communicate at the same time, emphasising the skills and competencies that the child has developed. These are not two opposing hopes: ‘I hope with you for a full recovery, and in the meantime I stand by your side to make this time as comfortable as possible for K’ (professional).

The communicator tutor is closely related to Joan Tronto’s phases of care – caring about, taking care of, care- giving and care- receiving (Tronto, 1993) – which frame inclusive education as a relational, responsive practise. Each phase of Tronto’s framework reflects the core competencies required for a communicator tutor: rather than simply applying fixed strategies, the tutor’s role is deeply relational and interdependent. In particular, the educator’s reflection brings us back to the distinction between “caring about” and “taking care of”. As Tronto suggests “Caring about involves the recognition in the first place that care is necessary. It involves noting the existence of a need and making an assessment that this need should be met. Caring about will often involve assuming the position of another person or group to recognize the need [...] Taking Care of. Taking care of is the next step of the caring process. It involves assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it. Rather than simply focusing on the need of the other person, taking care of involves the recognition that one can act to address these unmet needs. If one believes that nothing can be done about a problem, then there is no appropriate ‘taking care of’ (Tronto, 1993, p. 106). This relational dynamic produces a notion of responsibility that goes beyond simple accountability:

responsibility in this context is not just about fulfilling past obligations, but is future-oriented and focuses on what has yet to unfold (Zamagni, 2019). This framework challenges tutors to move beyond a conventional, individualistic notion of responsibility, where good intentions are sufficient, and towards a relational responsibility based on attentiveness, responsiveness and a willingness to engage deeply with the needs of others.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The training programme built around the roles of expert tutor has revealed the complex set of competences required for this function. Within the broad theoretical considerations found in the literature, the CanMEDS model provided valuable guidance in the selection of content and The training programme aimed at the roles of the expert tutor has highlighted the complex set of competences required for this function. In the context of the extensive theoretical considerations found in the literature, the CanMEDS model provided valuable guidance for the selection of content and methods.

The competency-based approach was particularly effective in identifying the tasks and competencies expected of an expert tutor. In this process, engaging with experienced tutors who translated their practical and theoretical knowledge into a clear framework proved crucial in avoiding a normative and prescriptive view, which is often a risk.

One of the key achievements of the programme is that it moves away from prescriptive norms and promoting an approach that brings to light the implicit assumptions that often surround the practise of tutoring. Rather than focusing on a single 'ideal' profile for the tutor, the course adopts a pluralistic, reflective approach that emphasises the analysis of existing practises and the identification of strengths and areas for improvement in inclusive educational processes. This shift from theoretical ideals to practical challenges enables tutors to engage more effectively with specific, situated problems and promote meaningful educational outcomes. The course design was informed by a systemic perspective that encouraged participants to move beyond entrenched positions and embrace a vision of education as community-oriented practice (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015).

The CUAP programme provided a collaborative environment for diverse experts – higher education educators, non-academic specialists, school teachers, and administrators – who all brought valuable perspectives to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education. These collective insights underpinned the relevance of the course to the development of tutors as reflective practitioners within a learning ecosystem. The research and training initiative aimed to strengthen this systemic perspective, focusing on the active engagement of participants. Through activities such as reflective practices and workshops, the programme offered participants the opportunity to engage with challenges, articulate their difficulties and share possible solutions. This collaborative and reflective environment raised participants' awareness of their central role in promoting inclusive processes and introducing innovative elements in the school context (Teruggi, Cinotti, & Farina, 2021). By focusing on reflective practice, collaborative growth, and the integration of different perspectives, the CUAP programme has successfully supported the development of a new professional identity for tutors. This identity moves away from the traditional, isolated figure tied to routine tasks to a more dynamic role as a driver of change and innovation, able to connect schools to the university and promote a more democratic, supportive and inclusive educational community.

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