

The teaching placement of trainee special needs teacher as an embodied process of professional development

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Abstract: Practical training placements within the specialisation programmes for special needs teachers (TFA), in accordance with Ministerial Decree 249/2010 (MIUR, 2010), are regarded as the key training tool for combining theoretical knowledge with classroom practice, which presents open-ended challenges daily. From this perspective, the classroom, as well as being a fertile physical space, represents an ecosystem within which the future special needs teacher inevitably exerts an influence through proxemics, posture and spatial positioning. Drawing on Watzlawick's well-known maxim, namely "one cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick et al., 1971), the training of special needs teachers takes the form of a deeply embodied experience, in which the educational relationship is geared towards enhancing the dialectic between the body, emotions, cognitive aspects and context, in accordance with a transformative vision. This paper highlights how the teacher's body serves as an identity-forming mechanism and a crucial tool for the construction of inclusive and informed knowledge, within a specific space of reflexivity. The study adopts a qualitative approach of a narrative and self/co-evaluative nature, derived from the analysis of a textual corpus consisting of logbooks and reflective narratives produced by a group of trainee special needs teachers from the 10th cycle of the TFA programme at Link Campus University. The study emphasises the importance of structuring teaching practice placements - in the broadest sense of teacher training - as workshops focused on bodily and relational awareness, to rebuild educational bridges between theory and practice, which are essential for fostering ever more far-reaching pathways towards educational and social inclusion.

Keywords: Embodied cognition; TFA teaching practice; reflective narration; university education; educational and social inclusion.



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1. The teaching placement as a bridge between university education and teaching practice

Various European documents and national literature strongly emphasise the fundamental and professionalising role of reflective practices in initial teacher

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training (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; OECD, 2014; European Commission, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2020; Baldacci et al., 2020). From this perspective, the teaching placement offers a valuable opportunity to develop critical, reflective and self-regulatory awareness regarding professional practice and the full realisation of the teacher's potential. Among the fundamental aspects that define it, one can identify an attitude characterised by inquiry, observation, reflection, comparison, verification and heuristic interpretation (Maccario, 2015; Bolognesi & D'Ascenzo, 2018; Borruso et al., 2023; Gallelli, 2025).

More specifically, the teaching placement within the specialisation courses for special needs teacher (TFA-Work-based training placement) is both a strategic setting and a sophisticated, inclusive training tool capable of combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience and the challenging issues encountered in the classroom – issues which, now more than ever, require the adoption of an open and pluralistic interpretative framework. Within the processes of meaning-making and experiential learning (Mortari, 2009), the future special needs teacher is called upon to respond to the complexity of today's school contexts, whilst being mindful of their role as an agent of social change and a promoter of justice, equality and respect for diversity. The very essence of the teaching habitus lies in the formative dynamics which, as the perspective of Special Education indicates, are embodied in *knowledge*, *know-how*, *personal qualities* and *emotional intelligence* (Bocci, 2021).

By moving beyond the notion – with firm conviction – that the special needs teacher is primarily responsible for providing individual assistance, the inclusion model promotes an ecosystemic view of shared educational responsibility. Canevaro and Ianes (2019) argue for the need to rethink the role of the special needs teacher as a promoter of inclusive processes capable of engaging the entire school community, and as a catalyst for collaborative practices, shared planning and the full participation of all pupils. Support – or rather, forms of support – cannot therefore be interpreted as a delegated function, but rather as a widespread competence that permeates the entire education system, aimed at implementing pathways for the holistic development of all pupils, without exception. It is precisely in this regard that the scientific perspectives of *Embodied Cognition* and *Embodied Education* (Gomez Paloma, 2020; Gomez Paloma & Damiani, 2021) take on particular significance in the training and professional practice of special needs teachers.

Posture, proxemics, movement, gaze, gestures, tone of voice, bodily sensations and the management of space are not merely incidental elements or implicit aspects of educational practice, but tools for developing teaching professionalism. By profoundly influencing the quality of interactions, the creation of an inclusive atmosphere and the cognitive and emotional engagement of pupils and teachers, the teacher's physical presence thus becomes an essential part of educational intent. The mediation of communicative practices, the emotional regulation of the class group and the promotion of well-being in the classroom, according to a systemic approach, are dimensions traversed by the body as an instrument of knowledge through which the teacher can examine their

own way of being within the relationship, of inhabiting the space and of responding to the complexity of the needs of school contexts.

Building on these theoretical premises, this paper aims to explore teaching practice as an embodied process of developing professional teaching competence, by highlighting the virtuous interplay between the body, emotions, cognitive aspects and context, from a transformative perspective² (Creati et al., 2026).

2. Research design, objectives and participants

This study stems from the recognition that the body in action serves as a key mediator in reflections on teachers' professional identity. Furthermore, the predominantly inductive approach of the research, developed through a circular movement between empirical data and the embodied framework, highlights the possibility of constructing genuinely inclusive educational practices. From this perspective, the embodied framework serves as a resource for activating and articulating the various forms of thinking about experience.

In this respect, the teaching placement represents a prime context for embodied professional learning, in which pedagogical knowledge is constructed through the interplay of experience, reflection and relationships. The body is not regarded as a mere vehicle for teaching, but as an epistemological tool through which the trainee teacher interprets educational situations, builds meaningful relationships and develops inclusive skills.

The study, conducted by both researchers in their capacity as lecturers on the 10th cycle of the TFA programme at the "Link Campus" University, involved a selected group of 570 upper secondary school students enrolled on the specialisation programme at the same university.

The main objectives of the research can be summarised as follows:

- to understand and value the narrative dimensions of trainee teachers;
- investigate the role of the teacher's body as a marker of identity and a fundamental tool in the construction of inclusive and informed knowledge, within contexts of educational reflexivity.

The formulation of the research questions relates to the following issues concerning the initial training of special needs teachers:

- How do the embodied experiences encountered during the teaching placement contribute to the construction of the professional identity and reflexivity of the future special needs teacher?
- What meanings do trainee teachers attribute to the bodily dimension in the educational relationship?

² The use of the term "embodied" refers to possible experiences in which the body plays an active role in acting within and giving meaning to the educational setting. This dimension emerges in the trainees' accounts in relation to their perception and awareness of their own bodies, posture, proxemics, the management of distance and physical presence, movement within space, tone and modulation of the voice, as well as bodily sensations associated with specific situations. The research also focused on those reflections in which bodily experience is recognised, interpreted and brought into interaction with teaching practice.

- How does reflection on embodied experiences facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices and knowledge?

Through a qualitative analysis of the narratives derived from the completion of the critical reflection tools specific to the placement activities, the research sought to explore the ways in which the body, space and relationships contribute to the construction of professional knowledge. These dimensions, which emerged during the teaching placement as a means of conveying personal experiences, meanings and positions within a training programme, have helped to outline new perspectives for and within university education.

This body of literature, comprising logbooks from the practical teaching placement – containing the reflective narratives produced by the trainee teachers, self-assessment forms and peer assessments – aims to recognise the role of future special needs teacher as reflective agents in the transformation of themselves and the school context (Schön, 1987). Specifically, the embodied and situated nature of the training programmes draws on the concept of *embodied reflexivity*³ (Green & Hopwood, 2015), which emphasises emotions, perceptions, motor skills, gestures, and internal and physical postures as essential interpretative elements of bodily experience that shape and inform the professional reflection of special needs teachers.

An analysis of the logbooks and the placement report, an assessment of the final reflective narratives, a review of the self-assessment forms, and an examination of the evaluations shared with university tutors and host tutors show how embodied observation becomes a participatory and collaborative act. A process in which non-verbal communication and the management of space can be identified as effective mediators of inclusion, supporting constantly evolving reflective practices and sustainable educational choices capable of questioning, from both a critical and creative perspective, the demands of full inclusion.

2.1. Methodological approach

The data analysis was conducted using the qualitative-interpretative methodological framework of *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2023), which envisages the researcher playing an active role in the production of interpretative themes and their associated meanings, going beyond the mere identification of descriptive categories.

In line with the principles of this methodological approach, the researchers' position was regarded as an integral part of the interpretative process. As university lecturers to the participants involved in the context in which the logbooks were produced, the researchers interpreted the data drawing on their specific professional experience and familiarity with teacher training processes. This position, regarded as an interpretative resource to be made explicit, directed their analytical focus towards the way in which the bodily, emotional, relational

³ The concept of *embodied reflexivity*, taken as an interpretative category, integrates the perspective of embodiment with that of professional reflexivity. It does not simply refer to reflection on the body, but to a process in which bodily experience forms part of the reflective process and the construction of the teacher's professional profile.

and reflective dimensions of the experience influence the construction of professional teaching identity. It also highlighted how the recursive movement between the empirical corpus, the researchers' interpretations and the embodied theoretical framework supported the revision of the categories and themes under development.

The focus on interpretative quality and the transparency of the analytical process has resulted in adherence to the following stages of the process⁴:

1. repeated and immersive reading of the logbooks compiled by the course participants and used as training documentation, to enable familiarisation with the data and the identification of initial interpretative insights;

2. initial coding of the data, through the identification of semantic units and the assignment of descriptive codes, kept as faithful as possible to the content of the texts. Among the main emerging dimensions relating to the codes, the following were identified: bodily and emotional awareness (posture, proxemics, body perception, emotions), the educational relationship, the management of space, reflective processes, a sense of professional efficacy, and the formation of teaching identity;

3. the interpretative categories and themes were constructed through the comparison, grouping and differentiation of codes, identifying recurring patterns, semantic proximities and conceptual connections found within the corpus. This process yielded broader interpretative categories, from which the four final themes were defined, each centred on an organising concept, understood as a core of meaning capable of integrating, interpreting and characterising the various codes;

4. review and interpretative validation of the themes, through the intersection of empirical data and the embodied theoretical framework. The themes were assessed for internal consistency, mutual distinction, interpretative coherence and their ability to represent the entire corpus. This process also involved a re-examination of the semantic units associated with each theme, in order to verify the relevance of the codes and categories;

5. interpretation and definition of the results in the light of scientific literature, to establish a dialogue between the empirical evidence and the contributions of reflective pedagogy, *Embodied Education* and studies on inclusive education (Montanari, 2026).

3. Results

The research findings highlight how the training programme for special needs teachers is not merely about acquiring theoretical or methodological knowledge, but rather an embodied training experience that is particularly significant for the development of professional identity. An analysis of the reflective journals produced reveals that each teacher in the selected group tends to perceive the

⁴ During data collection, particular care was taken not to collect sensitive or personal information relating to third parties. Furthermore, the school-related situations described have been reworked into narrative and anonymous accounts, for educational and self-reflective purposes only. This approach on the part of the researchers also stemmed from the fact that they were involved in the design, supervision and evaluation of the work placement.

teaching placement as an experience that contributes to the development of greater bodily awareness. From this perspective, the body, micro-gestures and conscious management of space could act as powerful mediators of inclusion, proving just as effective as verbal communication (Lucangeli & Vullo, 2021). The practice of reflection, guided by school and university tutors both during and after placement, enables future special needs teachers to understand how their own posture and physical presence can become a tool for building relationships rather than acting as a defensive barrier.

This renewed perspective facilitates the transition from immature and/or inexperienced observers to consciously centred professionals capable of co-constructing accessible and inclusive learning contexts. Being immersed in the experience fuels reflective practice in such a way that the trainees' ways of seeing, of perceiving themselves and of acting are modified, reorganised, renegotiated, recomposed and transformed. The reflective processing arising from narrative accounts – regarded as genuine acts of learning – is a source of multifaceted possibilities explored through educational research with and on the body (Ferri, 2022).

Specifically, as shown in Table 1, the first thematic area emerging from the narrative-reflective materials – namely, “the body as a professional tool” – is interpreted, with growing awareness, as a professional resource rather than as something to be controlled (Sani et al., 2021). As the placement progresses, the initial prevailing sense of uncertainty regarding one's place in the classroom (evidenced by stiff postures, limited movements and difficulty interacting with pupils) tends to give way to greater mastery. Conscious teaching practice helps the trainee to recognise posture, interpersonal distance, body orientation and the management of space as key aspects of the educational relationship.

The second thematic area, namely “physical presence fosters inclusion”, interprets physicality within teaching practice as an inclusive function capable of transforming the relational dynamics of the classroom. Rather than simply being present alongside the pupil with a disability, the trainee is called upon to develop a systemic physical presence, a proxemic awareness that could help to reduce and/or eliminate forms of micro- and macro-exclusion, thereby promoting shared participation in classroom activities. In this sense, silence, eye contact, the rhythm of movements, spatial positioning and subtle gestures are described as highly educational values that contribute to fostering an educational environment based on trust, cooperation and shared responsibility. The third theme, namely “reflection in/on action”, highlights the refinement of observational and reflective skills during teaching activities through the recognition of one's own bodily reactions, which are the result of ongoing emotional and relational processes.

The logbook, as a key tool for embodied reflection, can facilitate a careful re-examination of bodily experiences, transforming them into professional skills generated by the processes of *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1993).

Embodied reflexivity can have a profound influence on the development of increasingly refined forms of self-regulation through changes in trainees' posture, tone of voice, proxemics and communication styles.

The fourth theme, namely "identity transformation", highlights the role of the transformative process of the teaching placement in the gradual redefinition of the role identity of the trainee teacher, who progressively comes to see themselves as a mediator of inclusive education, and no longer merely as a figure providing individual support (Montanari, 2015).

This leads to greater and more effective participation in classroom life, which – starting from an initially peripheral role – would encourage trainee teachers to progressively refine both their teaching expertise and their own professional development. The teaching placement experience could aim to foster the development of soft skills such as communication, empathy, collaboration, emotional and reflective skills, aspects of training that should be carefully nurtured.

Furthermore, these reflective accounts reveal a new understanding of the classroom space as a dynamic relational context that fully integrates the future special needs teacher into educational practices. Moving between the desks, adjusting interpersonal distance, the conscious use of proxemics and careful attention to the different areas of the classroom are seen as valuable tools for promoting participation, preventing situations of exclusion and fostering well-being in the classroom. In summary, the four thematic areas are defining aspects of the initial training of special needs teachers, within which the teaching placement takes on the character of a genuinely transformative experience. In fact, the focus of the research is not on measuring the effects of work experience placements on pupils, but rather on exploring the meanings that the selected group of teachers attribute to their own experience and on analysing the processes through which they interpret changes in their own professional practice. The continuous dialectical interaction between reflection, experience and bodily awareness that permeates the professionalism of the future special needs teacher reinforces the embodied structural dimension.

Narrative extracts	Description code	Thematic area
<i>«I realised that the way I sat next to the pupil changed our relationship».</i> <i>«I used to think that teaching was mainly about talking. During my teaching placement, I discovered that the way I enter the classroom, move about and stand still conveys a great deal before I even speak».</i>	Postural management and relational closeness	1. The body as a professional tool

There was absolute chaos in the classroom, and I was about to shout. Then I stopped myself. My silence, combined with a focused look... worked better than a thousand verbal reminders». When I simply stayed close to the pupil without taking over for them, I saw their independence grow. My presence wasn't assistance, but reassurance».	Micro-gestures and non-verbal communication	2. Physical presence fosters inclusion
I realised that whenever the class got noisy, I would automatically tense my shoulders. I thought it was just me, but the pupils seemed to pick up on it straight away and became even more tense». Rereading what I'd written, I realised that the problem wasn't the pupils' behaviour, but the way I reacted physically».	Self-perception of physical tension. Defensive posture	3.Reflection-in-action/ Reflection-on-action
The teaching placement is no longer just about applying theory, but a process in which I have redefined my role in the classroom, moving from feeling like an outside observer to becoming a professional capable of helping to build inclusion within the classroom environment». At first, I felt like a guest. I was waiting for someone to tell me what to do. Over time, I began to feel part of the class council and to suggest activities». The teaching placement made me realise that being a support teacher means contributing to everyone's learning, not just that of the pupil assigned to me».	Professional awareness and the educational relationship	4. The transformation of identity

amples of narrative extracts.

4. Discussion and limitations of the research

It can be inferred from the discussion of the results that the embodied experiences gained during the placement, as described in the participants' accounts, are regarded as central to the development of the future special needs teacher's inclusive professionalism. In the teaching placement – as a key training mechanism capable of integrating theoretical and experiential dimensions – the close interconnection between the bodily dimension and reflective practice, is highlighted, as aptly documented by the significant narrative material produced.

Building on the initial research questions – namely, how embodied experiences shape the professionalism of trainee special needs teachers and how

reflection on these experiences fosters inclusive practices – the following concise observations are highlighted.

The trainees interpreted these embodied experiences as potentially conducive to:

- transforming the placement into a participatory and situated experience;
- raising awareness of the role of the body, non-verbal communication and educational relationships;
- developing continuous, critical and creative reflective practice;
- recognising the body, space and relationships as mediators of inclusion;
- to support the design of meaningful and accessible learning environments through a new spatial awareness;
- to strengthen the link between theory and practice, promoting pathways to educational and social inclusion.

Any analysis of the data collected must consider the precise identification of certain critical issues and methodological limitations that could, at least in part, affect the validity of the findings.

First and foremost, the assessment tools used (logbooks of the practical teaching placement, reflective narratives, self-assessment and co-assessment forms) – which are exclusively self-assessment and self-reflective in nature – constitute both a distinctive feature and a limitation of the research.

These tools do, in fact, provide insight into the meanings attributed by the group of trainee special needs teachers to their own experiences and to the processes of self-reflection linked to their professional identity, but they do not allow for direct verification of the effects of these experiences on pupils, on relational dynamics or on the school context. The transformations described by the participants must therefore be interpreted as perceived and narrated changes, rather than as objectively measured outcomes.

Furthermore, self-narratives, influenced by the trainees' subjectivity, may be affected by social desirability and a tendency to wish to demonstrate that they have properly learnt the theoretical models from the university and school tutors who supported them throughout their placement.

Future studies could complement diary-based narratives with data triangulation using tools for the systematic observation of the practices of host school tutors and, where possible, investigate pupils' perspectives, in order to explore the relationship between the changes perceived by special needs teachers and those observable in educational contexts.

5. Conclusions and future research directions

Faced with a rapidly changing world that is called upon to tackle unprecedented challenges, teachers need training that critically examines the mechanisms governing mainstream school contexts. They also need guiding principles that encourage them to take action, as part of the process of constructing situated knowledge, towards further and renewed possibilities, beyond what is already given, including through an increasing focus on their own bodily presence, as an object of pedagogical awareness and reflection on the educational relationship.

Living with the complexity, uncertainty and instability of the contemporary world requires adopting a new, reflective approach capable of underpinning professional practice and direct experience, in the spirit of genuinely inclusive action.

From this perspective, the acquisition of knowledge that is deeply rooted in a particular context – aimed at integrating pedagogical insights, interpersonal skills and a commitment to change – reduces the risk associated with a purely technical approach consisting of a repertoire of techniques derived from technical solutions. We must therefore avoid the approach of training technicians who are incapable of promoting the systemic and ecosystemic changes necessary for a school that is truly for everyone.

The recognition of the body as a mediator – effectively supported by *Embodied Education* – confirms the concept that professional knowledge and the nature of the educational relationship are shaped through the dynamic interaction between perception, action and context. And it is precisely in this direction that – whilst avoiding generalisations – the aspects identified offer useful insights for future research and further study, as proposed below. These hypotheses, aimed at consolidating expertise within the professional community and enhancing methods of reflection, critical re-evaluation and reorientation of one's bodily experience (Mariani, 2020), provide fruitful frameworks for the promotion and experimentation with increasingly effective training practices.

In light of the considerations set out above, and drawing on the trainees' accounts – which help bring to light implicit aspects of their professional experiences – several research avenues emerge that appear particularly promising:

1. to expand the selected group of trainee teachers from future TFA cohorts;
2. to extend the paradigm of embodied reflective narration to all university teaching placement programmes relating to teacher training;
3. to explore the perceptions of pupils, host tutors and subject teachers regarding the trainee teachers' embodied practices;
4. to design a longitudinal study on how the embodied competences developed during the teaching placement promote inclusive educational processes;
5. to rethink school spaces to foster the bodily and relational dimensions of teaching practice, in support of inclusive processes.

Such a forward-looking vision can pave the way for the reimagining of teaching practice as a space for the generation of professional knowledge, consistent with the key principles of inclusive education, which also encompasses embodied professional skills. Placing value on these skills in initial special needs teacher training means contributing to the creation of an accessible and sustainable school, in which the teacher's body is not merely the means through which teaching takes place, but the primary pedagogical space in which inclusion takes shape (Gomez Paloma et al., 2016).

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