What teachers think about inclusion
Data from a large-scale explorative survey

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Abstract
L'inclusione risulta ai primi posti delle agende dei sistemi educativi scolastici di tutto il mondo. Ma cosa significa "inclusione"? Gli insegnanti sanno veramente di cosa si tratta? Conoscono le strategie per realizzarla? Questo lavoro esplora alcuni dei "miti" sul tema, sottolineando alcune possibili contraddizioni tra ciò che viene dichiarato e ciò che viene agito rispetto alla inclusione. Ad esempio il lavoro di gruppo viene considerato come una "tipica" strategia inclusiva, ma, dietro ad una affermazione come "tutti hanno partecipato", si nasconde spesso lo scarso contributo da parte degli studenti considerati "meno competenti", o in situazione di difficoltà. Inoltre, se da un lato l'apprendimento tra pari può essere una importante strategia per migliorare il rendimento degli studenti con difficoltà, dall'altro, non consente agli alunni "più competenti" di esprimere al meglio il proprio potenziale. A partire dalla esperienza progettuale maturata nella iniziativa FIRB "Learning For All" (www.learningforall.it), l'articolo presenta i risultati di una indagine esplorativa che ha coinvolto più di 250 insegnanti della scuola italiana. Senza la pretesa di generalizzare i risultati, questo contributo tenta di far emergere cosa pensano gli insegnanti della inclusione, cosa fanno in classe per realizzarla, cosa stanno ottenendo in termini di benefici e problemi.

Inclusion is high on the agenda of school systems around the world. But what does "inclusion" mean? Do teachers really know what it is? Do they know what strategies to use in order to achieve it? This paper investigates some of the "myths" about this issue, highlighting that teachers are often in contradictory in what they state and what they actually do. Group-work is a typical inclusive strategy, yet oftentimes disguises the weaker contributions of lower performing students while giving the impression that "everyone is taking part." Peer-to-peer learning may be useful for the lower performing students but may also not add much to the best ones. Using the results from a survey of 258 respondents, includ-

ing all teachers on the job, from all school grades, this paper provides useful findings in this regard. Additional considerations come from the authors' experience with a three-year long national project about educational experiences and inclusion, called Learning4All - www.learningforall.it. This involved more than 250 teachers being interviewed in detail. The paper presents what teachers think and say about inclusion, what they do in the class and what they get, in terms of benefits, from the students.

Parole chiave: Inclusione, Tecnologie educative, Lavoro di gruppo, Individualizzazione, Personalizzazione

Keywords: Inclusion, Educational Technology, Group work, Individualization, Personalization

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Paragrafo

1. Introduction[1]

This paper is about teachers' perception about inclusion. This includes the strategies they use for inclusion of learners with special educational needs (SENs), such as group work, and also what teachers get in their everyday practice. Based on an extensive survey administered to 258 teachers on the job, it is found that in a time in which inclusion is high on the agenda of educational authorities around the globe, a lot of confusion about what the term really means is widely spread. This confusion implies a risk. If taken in the wrong sense, inclusion may be apparent, and the teacher may feel that she has been successful into including all of her students. Often this is not substantial, creating *de facto* "ghettos" among the students.

A real-life example may help clarify the issue. In a junior high-school, involved in a digital storytelling project (PoliCultura [Di Blas, Paolini, 2013]), the teacher was quite satisfied with the outcomes of the experience. She said that all her students were enthusiastic and that everyone had been given a role, even the ones who usually did not perform well. Then she clarified that one of these students had been given the role of checking the work schedule. He would move among the groups, taking notes about their progress and whether they were keeping the deadlines. This may be acceptable in a sense, but one might ask whether a teacher can be really content with just this result. Can it therefore be claimed that every-

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[1] This contribution, fully shared by the two authors, was drawn up as follows: paragraphs 3, 4, 5 by Nicoletta Di Blas; paragraphs 1, 2 by Luca Ferrari.

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one benefited from the experience in the same way? Were the students who looked for background materials, wrote texts, edited images and those who had been given lesser roles equally advantaged?

2. Background

Since the 1990s, the international political and scientific debate has promoted the concept of "inclusion", in which access and participation to education of all children (including those with SENs) are considered a priority. Moreover, Unesco (1994, 2006) recommends replacing the term "special educational needs" with "education for all" (Caldin, Cinotti, Ferrari, 2013). In order to promote real educational and cultural changes, the concept of education for all considers diversity as a value. In other words, inclusion aims to change the traditional educational view, typically based on the "specialized answer to special needs" (i.e. a focus on people with disabilities), into an "ordinary answer to the needs of all" (Caldin, 2010). As evident, the school plays a key role in facilitating both the inclusion processes and the personalization of learning, providing, at the same time, educational answers and teaching methods in line with the educational mission of "our" society.

The term "inclusion" can be seen to mean the process through which the school system and its protagonists (school board, students, teachers, family, territory, etc.) are shaped as a way to accommodate the needs of all children, especially of those with SENs (Nocera, 2009). The large adoption, across Europe, of inclusive approaches made explicit through tools like for example the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001) and the Index For Inclusion (2002) is not taking place by mere chance. They both offer a comprehensive approach on inclusion processes, including not only the person with a SEN, but also the overall context and its functional, cultural, social variables that may act as either barriers or facilitators in any educational intervention. Thus the inclusive perspective embraces the educational, social and political spheres (D'Alessio, 2009). It concerns all the students and affects the context first and then also the individuals and also turns a special intervention into an ordinary one (ibid). Finally, it refers to the social model of disability and to the empowerment construct, which puts at the center of the stage the disabled student and her family (ibid).

Italy is one of the first European nations to have adopted policies that favor scholastic integration and inclusion (laws: 118/1971, 517/77, 104/1992 etc.). Still, a more constructive approach shared among all the actors involved in the educational processes is needed. Maria Nocera (2013), for example, points at the need for more welcoming and openness towards diverse environments, through the adoption of good educational strategies aimed at promoting the cognitive and psycho-social development of children with diverse needs.

It is our opinion that such an inclusive approach should start from the analysis of the individual needs of the students, in order to elaborate ordinary answers valid for all. Of course this does not mean that the intervention should not start from a broader perspective, taking into consideration the whole context before dealing with the class and single students' needs. These are two different but complementary visions on inclusion, which can be useful to combine. It is necessary to create an educational environment that is capable at the same time of firstly supporting equality, namely guaranteeing that all students reach specific – and common – educational objectives and secondly, diversity, in the form of valorizing each student's own potentiality and motivations. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to integrate both individualization and personalization. Individualization means adopting different didactic strategies in terms of time, materials, learning styles, still keeping the same goals for all the students. The aim is to democratize teaching, in order to guarantee the right to equality. Personalization instead means *"to give all students the opportunity of giving themselves and reaching different goals, of choosing not only the educational paths but also the knowledge and competencies to be achieved, in relation to attitudes, motivations and resources that make every singly student 'different' with respect to the others"* (Guerra, 2004).

The "one-way-for-including-all" myth is thus to be discarded. Every pedagogical intervention should clearly define what horizons the inclusive approach is framed into: *"an adult should give a child both roots and wings. This applies to inclusion too. The roots must secretly develop under the earth, and taking them out means making the plant die. Sometimes we see someone who's flying – and that is because of the wings. But she should also feel that her strength comes from her roots"* (Canevaro, 2013).

While undoubtedly it is the case that literature is now widely shared and that international agreements and recommendations about inclusion exist, namely the Salamanca declaration in 1994, the Madrid declaration in 2002 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, these should be considered as the "polar star" in any inclusive interventions. At the same time, we think that teachers' experiences are of paramount relevance in order to sketch landscapes about inclusion in real school settings. This is what we will try to do in this paper.

3. Methodology of the Study

This paper is based on data derived from an exploratory survey on the teachers' perception about inclusion that was administered both online and in person in Spring 2012. Our research meant to compare the teachers' notion of inclusion with their everyday inclusive strategies.

The survey was administered in the frame of HOC-LAB's initiatives for teachers professional development. 258 teachers, coming from different parts of Italy,

answered to the survey: 63 in person, during a meeting at the lab's premises, and 195 online.

The teachers were all on the job; they were from all school levels, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
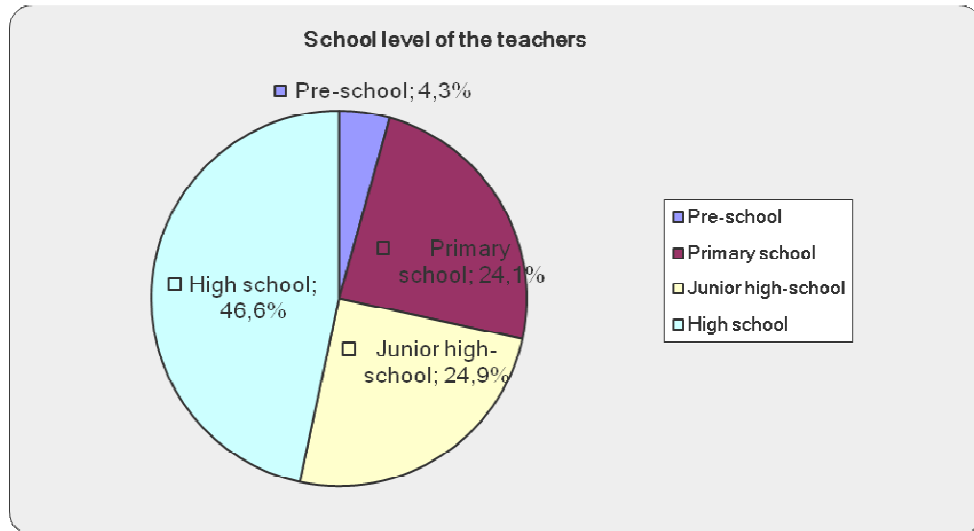
School levels of the teachers involved in the survey (253 respondents, 5 skipped the question)

Most of the teachers were from high-schools, while primary schools and junior high-schools are almost equally represented. Pre-school is poorly represented, but this is not likely to affect the investigation. This is because inclusion issues are poorly felt at this level, as data from the Learning4ALL portal in Figure 2 show. Learning4All gathers data (reports, interviews, materials, links, etc.) about ICT-based educational experiences at school and gathers them in a portal where data can be investigated crossing parameters (Ferrari et alii, 2012). Considering "inclu-sion" as a key feature from among the parameters (in the right hand side of Figure 2), then it can be seen that pre-school is the least affected (5,3% only).

Figure 2
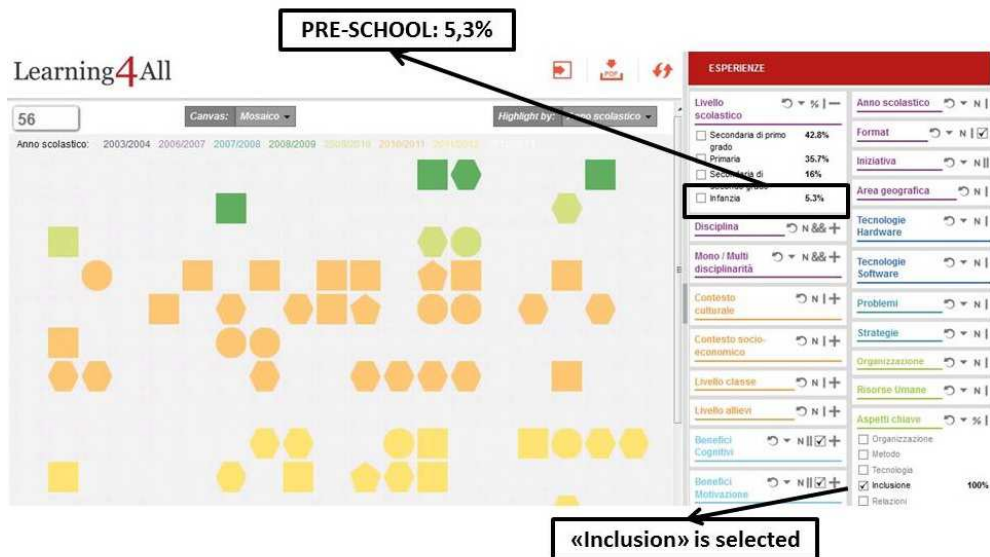
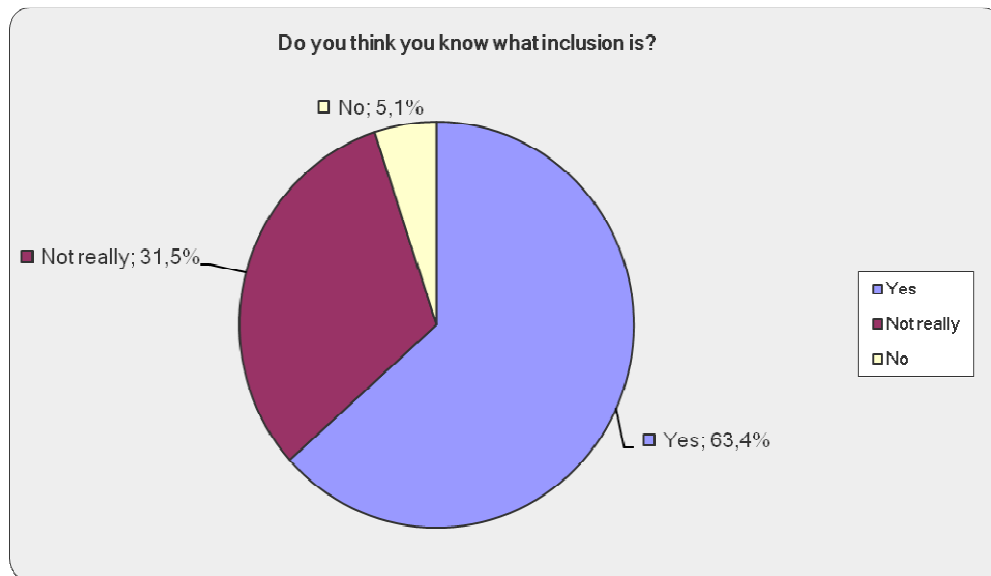The Learning4All portal, showing at what school-levels inclusion issues are felt.

The survey consisted of 11 questions. The questions were both multiple-choice and open-ended, in the sense that for each question space was provided for free comments. As the reader will see, the order of the questions is very relevant. That is because the teachers themselves realized at the end of the test that they had changed their mind during it, and that they had also made some contradictory responses.

4. Results

In this section, we present the survey's questions one by one, in the original order. For each question, a sample of the most significant teachers' comments are introduced, together with the authors' comments when needed.

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Question 1. Do you think you know what inclusion is?

Figure 3

Teachers' awareness about inclusion (257 respondents, 1 skipped the question)

At first, teachers were asked whether they thought they knew what inclusion is. Of course the majority answered "yes" (63.4%), but interestingly enough, a good number stated that they are uncertain (31.5%) or even admitted that they are not fully confident with this concept (5.1%). The teachers' comments were quite varied. "Inclusion means giving the same opportunities to each student in the school," one said. "I think inclusion means that all the students, even those with cognitive problems and difficulties, can reach the same goals," said another. This clearly shows teachers think of inclusion as needing an all-school approach. It is not clear whether inclusion is just about disabled children or more generically about students with difficulties (such as immigrants, low-performing students, poorly motivated students etc.). According to one teacher, inclusion means "to create together with the disabled student a meaningful learning path," another felt that "Inclusion means integrating foreign and disabled students."

Many teachers offered quite generic definitions, stressing the positive "feeling" of being together, rather than the strictly educational aspects. "Inclusion is a situation of well-being for the students, so that each one can express her own talent," said one teacher. "What matters is for the student to feel well: from this, relational benefits may derive and also (but less important), cognitive benefits," said another.
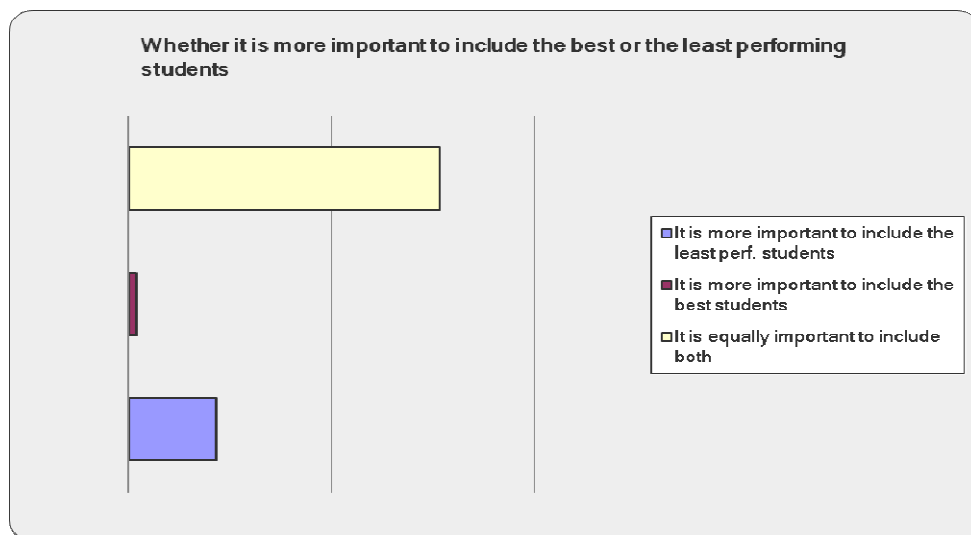
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"Inclusion means to include someone or something into something else, like for example a group. It means to be part of something. It is the opposite of exclusion," a further teacher said. "Inclusion is a form of pedagogy that allows each student to do her best," was the view of another; a further one felt that inclusion was "a relation among people: a sense of belonging." This shows the quite different understandings of the teachers, which can be quite problematic, since it is not clear what the goal should be: allowing all students to feel part of something, enhancing each student specific talents or making each student reach the same educational goals.

Two final teachers were of the view that inclusion means "implementing group-work activities," whereas another argued that "Inclusive pedagogy is strictly related to cooperative learning and working in groups, where students can help each other." We can see that the strict relation between inclusion and group work is taken for granted.

Question 2. What matters more? Including the best or the least performing students? Or both?

Figure 4

Teachers' opinion about whether the best or the least performing students should be included
(256 respondents, 2 skipped the question)

That both the best and the least performing students should be included is of course the most popular answer (76,6%), the one that "sounds correct"; inclusion of the least performing is also perceived as a good, politically correct, answer (21,5%); eventually, inclusion of the best is definitely perceived as not popular

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(2%). Still, some teachers showed concern for the best students, who sometimes get sacrificed in the teacher's effort to help those in difficulty: "we must be careful not to neglect the best students: they too need our help, for the risk is that they get marginalized as different" one said; and another, similarly: "unfortunately, I spend less effort to include the best ones, who oftentimes get bored during my classes". Two more teachers noted: "it is important not to level the best students with the worst; we must instead spur them [the best ones] to exploit their capabilities"; "we must differentiate pedagogy, so that the least performing students can reach minimum levels of learning while the high-flyers can exploit all their potential."

This concern is not shared by all: "the teacher must pay special attention to problematic students, the good ones are already ok and they are less needy", one teacher said.

In the view of some other teachers, the best could be "used" to support the less proficient ones, especially through group work: "work in small groups may allow the teacher to better differentiate the approach according to the students' talents, still keeping a broad educational goal common to all" one teacher said; and another proposed "to involve the best students in the effort of helping the least performing ones".

Overall, it must be noted that confusion about what inclusion really means surfaces. While most of the teachers declare they should care for both categories, or for the least performing, some show concern about leaving aside the best (a "lost occasion"). In addition, what including both groups means is also not clear.

Question 3. What do you do, in practice?

Figure 5
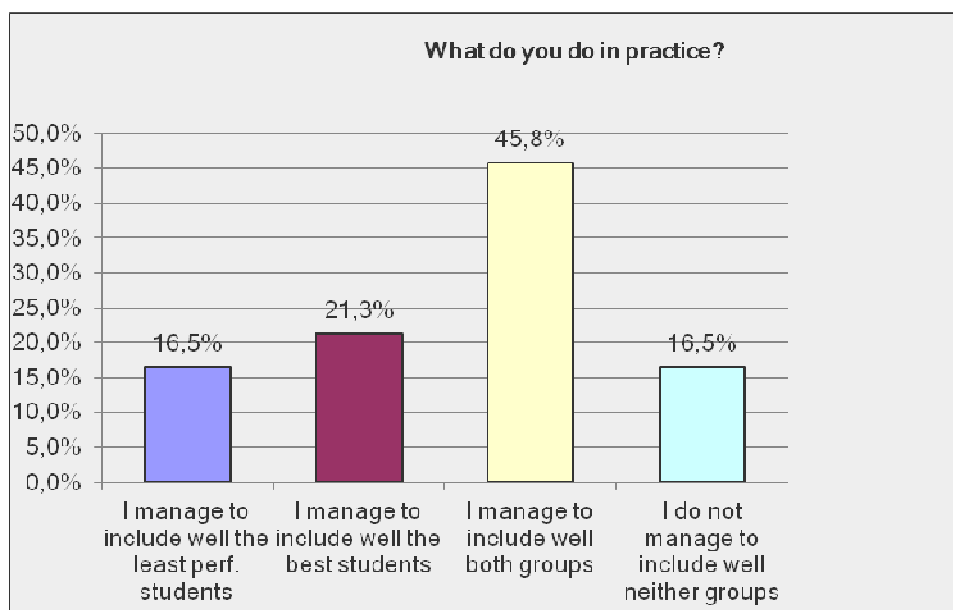
Teachers' self-assessment about what they do in practice (249 respondents – 9 skipped questions)

Most teachers (45,8%) are optimistic: they declare they are successful into including both the best and the least performing. Quite surprisingly, the teachers who declare that they can include the best students (20,9%) outnumber those who are successful into including the worst (16,4%). This means that, contrary to what they declare in theory, in practice it is easier, it comes more natural, it "just happens", that the best students are included more than the least performing ones. Eventually, a not negligible percentage (16,8%) admits that they are not successful at all ("I do not manage to include neither groups").

A teacher complains about the lack of guidelines regarding the best students: "there are many examples and guidelines about how to support the disabled students or those with learning difficulties, while few experiences are shared about how to support the best students". Still, best students turn out to be the ones that is easier to include, in the testimony of many: "it is easier to include the best students, because there is not enough time for the worst ones. In addition, oftentimes they are 'abandoned' by their families who do not even show up at school meetings: there is no way of having their support for doing additional work at home" says one teacher; "it is easier to include the best ones, who can then become

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points of reference for the others" says another. Technology appears to be the magic ingredient to involve the least performing ones: "in my normal practice, I am successful into including the best ones; when technology-based activities are there, also the least performing ones" one teacher notes.

In short, including the least performing appears to be a difficult task, in the words of many teachers: "in truth, it is quite difficult to include the least performing students. Sometimes I try hard to explain the lesson again, in such a way that it may be understandable to all, but then I realize I am talking to the best only – again. Honestly, I cannot say that I include both groups well.

Question 4. How do you organize groups?

Figure 6
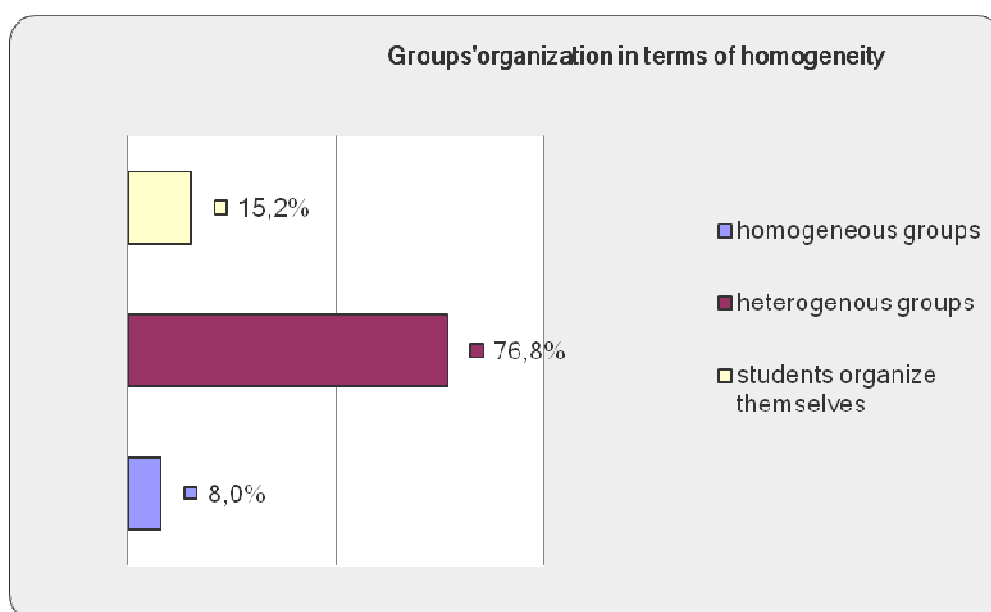
How teachers organize group work (254 respondents – 4 skipped questions)

Most of the teachers (76,8%) declare that they preferably organize heterogeneous groups, i.e. mixing up students with different performances. A minority (8%) go for homogenous groups, while others (15,2%) say they let students organize themselves, according to their preferences.

Crossing the answers with the teachers' school levels, we can notice that the percentage of teachers going for "heterogeneous group work" steadily decreases as the school level arises: 90,9% in pre-school, 87,7% in primary school, 77,6% in junior high-school and 69,2% in high-school. On the other hand, the percentage

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of teachers who let students organize themselves increases at high-school level: 9,1% in pre-school, 8,8% primary school, 8,5% in junior high-school and 24% in high-school. This comes as no surprise: it is more difficult to force grown-up students to work with someone they do not get along well with.

Many teachers offered an "it depends…" kind of answer, like for example this one: "it depends: on the activity, on the class' level, on the kind of students, on what the goal is…". Heterogeneous group work seems the obvious choice, but it does not always work well for the best (they either do not learn or do not help the others), like a teacher pointed out: "unfortunately, I have problems with the best: they either do not leave space to the less performing ones or they give them lesser roles, in fear of getting a bad mark."

Mixed strategies are adopted; a teacher explains: "sometimes homogenous groups are necessary to diversify the initial inputs (the best performers cannot be downgraded to the least's level); sometimes instead heterogeneous groups are needed, so that the best can pull the others to do more."

In spite of the fact that it looks more "right", some cracks seem to appear in the heterogeneous group-work. A teacher explains: "I decide whether to create homogenous or heterogeneous groups according to the activity; most of the times, I create heterogeneous groups, but sometimes I've seen that homogenous groups work much better and the students themselves do ask for them"; another teacher also finds faults in the heterogeneous schema: "I think that the best can help those who have more difficulties, even if a good exchange of knowledge and competences does not always occur."

In the words of many, homogenous group-work emerges as a good option: "I've worked a lot with heterogeneous group-work, but recently, to my own students' great surprise, I started using homogeneous group-work. I thought that in this way those who have more difficulties would be pushed to do more and to develop some strategy to reach the goal. And so it happened! Results were quite encouraging."

Question 5. What do students do within the groups?

Figure 7
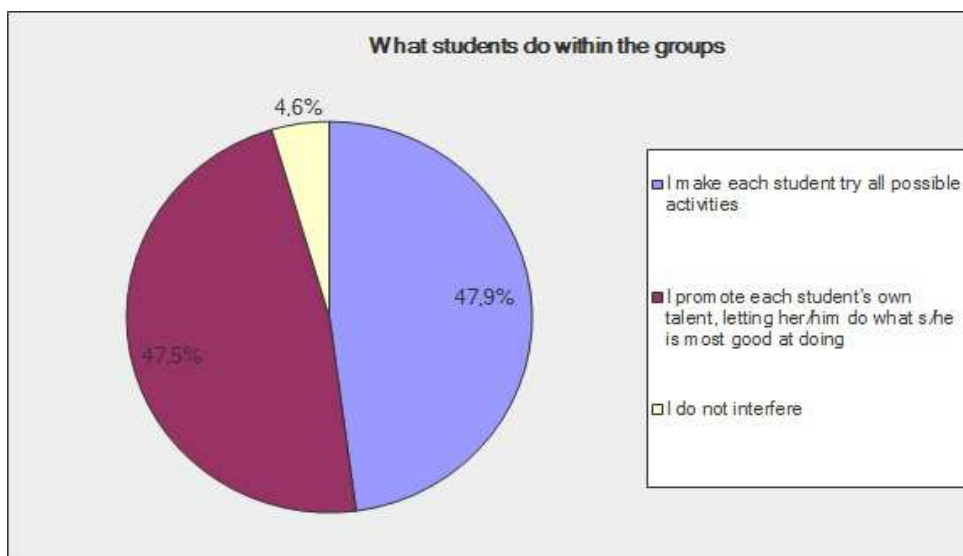
Whether students try all activities or not within a group (238 respondents, 20 skipped questions).

As it can be seen, the percentage of those who say that they favor the students' own talents and of those who say that they compel each student to try all possible activities are almost the same. Here an important remark must be made: this answer is a worrying sign of confusion, since it shows that teachers do not have a clear idea of what inclusion means, whether making all students learn the same things or involving everyone. Were "inclusion" interpreted in the sense that everyone has to learn the same things, then all (or the large majority) of teachers should have answered that they make all students try all possible activities. A large number of teachers, instead, seem quite comfortable with the idea of letting students do what they can already do well!

Looking at the school levels, it can be noticed that at pre-school and primary school levels, the majority of teachers push students to try all possible activities; at junior high-school, there is a drastic change: most of the teachers promote each student's own talent. Eventually, at high-school level, the percentages are almost equal (figure 8).

Figure 8
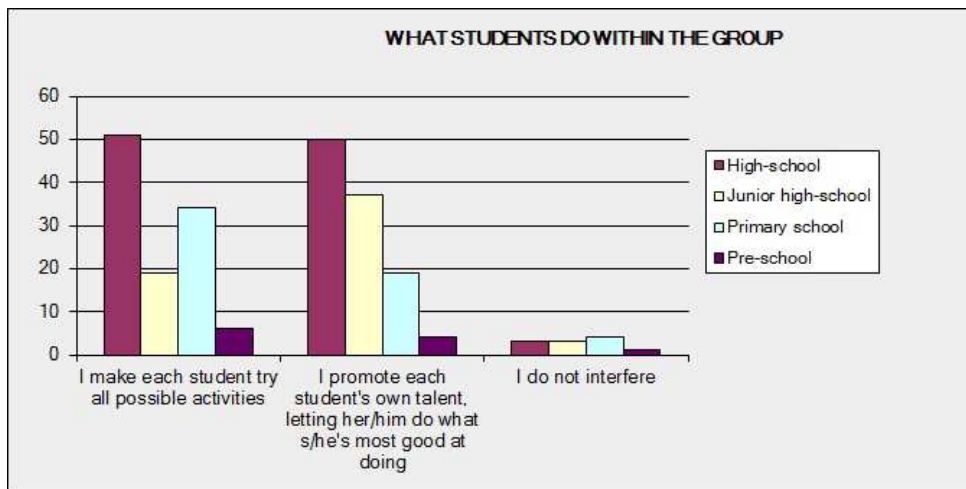
Whether students try all activities or not within a group according to school level (238 respondents, 20 skipped questions).

Comments by teachers show these two opposite views: "at primary school level, I think it is important to push all the students to try all the activities" a primary school teacher says; while a high-school teacher remarks: "inside a group, it is rewarding for the students to contribute with what they can do best."

Other comments show how teachers are actually undecided about the issue, the relevance of which they clearly perceive. A junior-high school teacher notes: "if I let everyone do what she can do best I'm not pushing them to discover what else they could do; the best result comes when a student discovers that she can perform well even in something that she did not thought she liked much." Another junior-high school teacher adopts a mixed strategy: "I know that pushing everyone to try everything would theoretically be the best solution, so that everyone learns to do everything, but in practice I do something different: at first, I let them do what they prefer, then I suggest they may change role to see whether there is something else they could do."

Question 6. Do you give everyone the same goals?

Figure 9
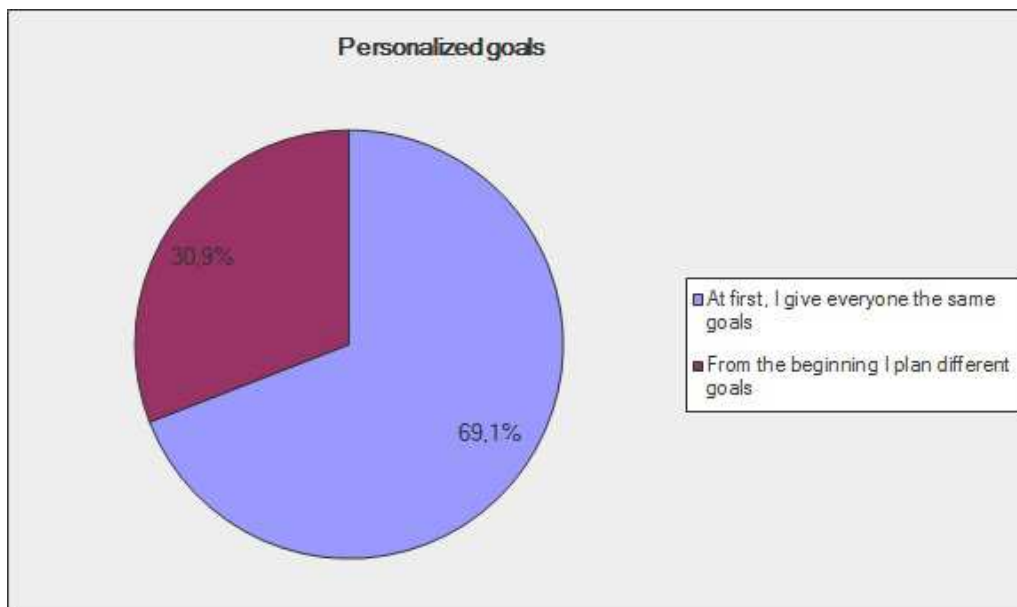
Whether teachers give all the students the same goals (236 respondents, 22 skipped questions).

Most of the teachers say that at least when they begin an activity they plan the same educational goals for everyone; it must be noted that in the case of this question the school level of the teachers does not make a difference.

The main remark is: how can the same goals be planned by most of the teachers when only half of them say that they compel all the students to try all the activities within the group work (see question 5)? A contradiction can be detected. Our perception is that the answer "I plan the same goals for everyone" is perceived as the politically correct one, but practice is different.

The teachers' comments show that many are confident that they can actually plan and achieve the same goals for everyone. A teacher says: "I give the same goal to the whole class and then I manage to make all the students achieve it"; another points out: "It is possible to make all students achieve the same goals, in different ways."

Other comments let the slight contradiction detected above emerge, like for example this one: "the goals are the same for all, though simplified". One may wonder: in what sense are the goals the same if they get simplified?

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Other teachers opt for diversified goals and explain the reason of their choice: "I give personalized goals because the level I wish a child to reach coincides with her best possible performance" one teacher says; another one clarifies: "at first I give everyone the same goals but then, as the work moves on, I make differences according to the students' performances. Giving everyone the same goals is instrumental to understanding whether there are any gaps among the students; then, I give personalized goals."

Eventually, a teacher admits her being at a loss when facing this challenging task: "to make all students achieve the same goals, I would need a magic wand!"

Question 7. Do you plan for everyone the same paths?

Figure 10
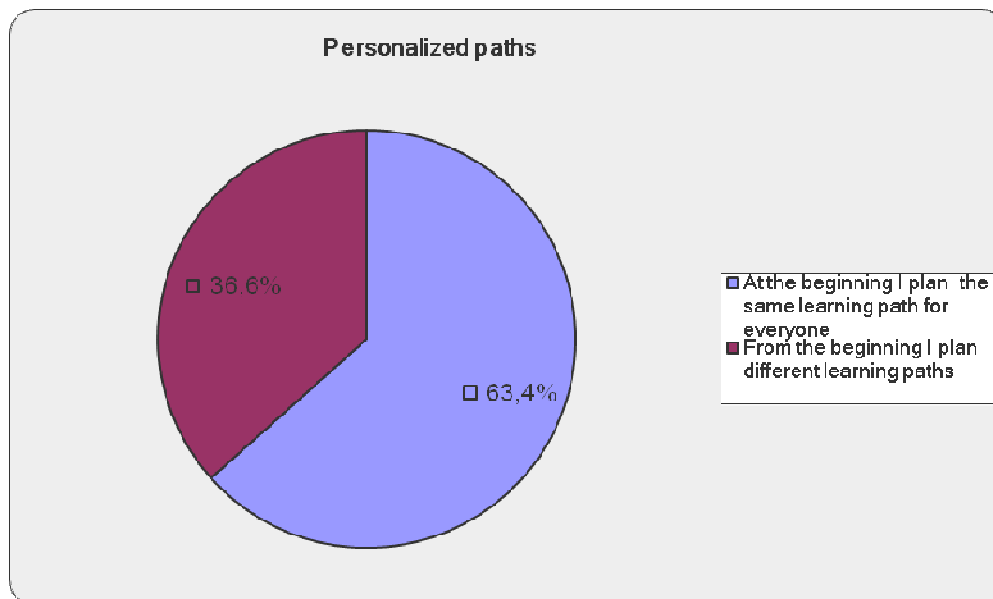
Whether teachers give all the students the same paths (235 respondents, 21 skipped questions).

Let us compare question 6 and question 7. From question 6, we get to know that 69,1% of the teachers start off planning the same goals for all the students; from question 7, , we see that 63,4% of the teachers start off planning the same learning path for all. These two data are consistent, with a small percentage of teachers (6% roughly) who probably plan the same goals for everyone but trying to devise different paths to achieve them.

From the teachers' comments, the fear of leaving someone behind is clear: "at first, all students leave from the same starting point; moving on I understand

whether some of the students need different strategies to go on with the others without anyone being left behind." The need for different strategies is perceived: "I think there is no point in leveling the whole class; I have to devise different paths according to the students' different skills and attitudes" a teacher remarks. When teachers do differentiate, they feel the need to clarify that the same goal is at stake and that it is not really a matter of differentiation but of personalization. "I give personalized, not different paths" one teacher says; and another: " I give different paths for the same goal".

Question 8. Inclusion is…

Figure 11
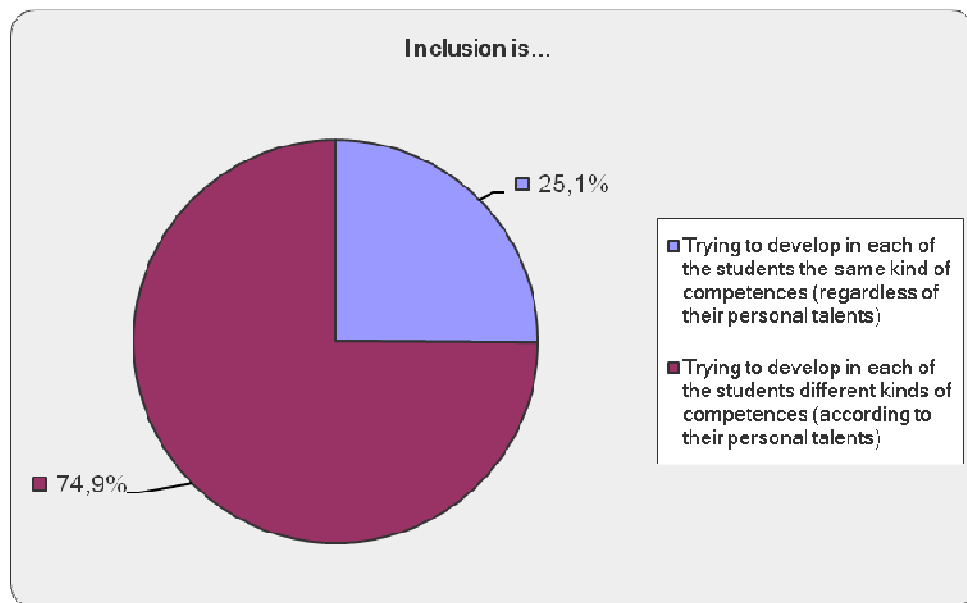
Teachers' opinion on what inclusion is (235 respondents, 23 skipped questions).

The goal of question 8 was to make teachers think again about what inclusion is. As for many of the above questions, confusion emerges: the majority of the teachers declares that inclusion means developing different kinds of competences according to the students' talents. But how does this data go with, for example, answers to the questions about goals and paths (questions 6 and 7)? It seems that a good number of teachers have switched from thinking that everyone should have the same goals and paths to thinking that they should develop their own talents and therefore have their own goals (and paths). A teacher says: "I was VERY undecided about what to answer… I think that most of the times we start with a
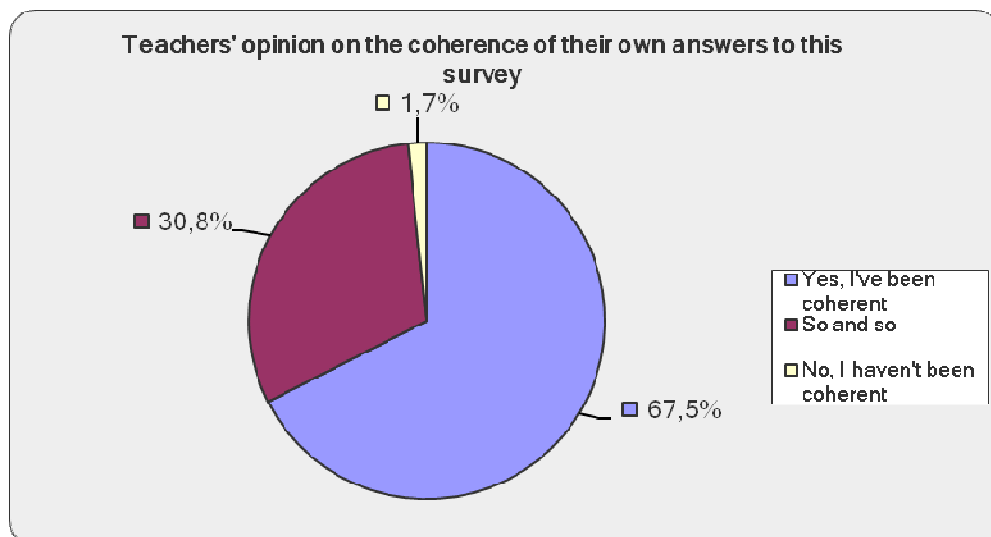
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common goal but then we let each student do what she can do best. That is why I went for the second answer." Another teacher admits not aiming at the same goals for all the students: "Inclusion is achieving the same competences at different levels."

Other answers show at the same time the awareness that students are different and the desire of being "fair": "inclusion is helping each student to develop her own talent, still giving everyone the same stimuli and opportunities", a teacher says. Most of the teachers seem to think that inclusion means actually to acknowledge the students' own talents and to foster them: "the teacher's role is to help each student care for her own education, discovering her own talents and developing them"; "when in the group I see that someone is better at storytelling while someone else is better at drawing, I let them do what they do best." Only a few teachers stick to the purpose of having all students reach the same goals, regardless of their own specific characteristics: "I think that the teacher's hard task is to make all students achieve the same results regardless of their personal talents", a teacher said.

Question 9. Do you think your answers to this survey have been coherent?

Figure 12

Teachers' opinion on their own coherence in answering the questions (234 respondents, 24 skipped questions).

Question 9 provoked teachers to critically reflect on their own answers: a non-negligible percentage admits having been incoherent or at least a bit incoherent:

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"I'm not sure my thinking and my behavior are coherent" one of the few teachers who commented on this question remarked; "rather than coherent, I've tried to be honest!" another one says. In other words: they acknowledge their own unclearness about the issue.

Question 10. Now do you think you know what inclusion is?

Figure 13
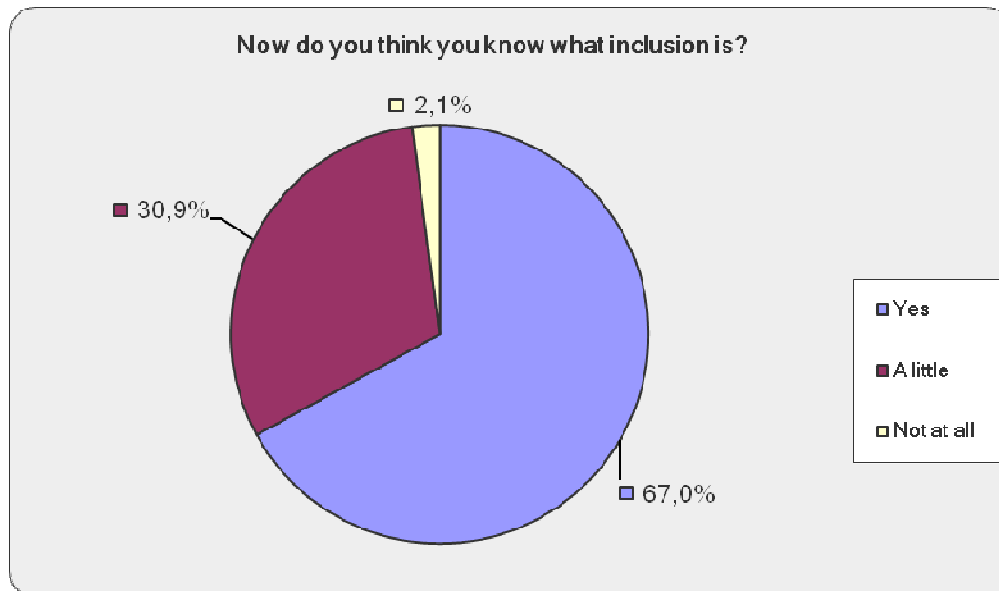
Teachers' awareness about inclusion after the test (233 respondents, 25 skipped questions).

At the end of the test, the very first question was asked again to the teachers: do you think you know what inclusion is? Our guess was that teachers, by the time of this last question, would have gotten a better awareness of this multi-faceted, complex issue. Data confirm our guess: with respect to question number 1, less teachers answer they do not know what inclusion is (from 5,6% to 2,1%).

5. Conclusions

In this last paragraph, we face the three issues our research stemmed from: what teachers think, what teachers do, what teachers get.

What do teachers think about inclusion? The survey shows that the issue of inclusion needs to be clarified, since there is still a lot of confusion. It may be accepted that "inclusion" means different things: that everyone is involved (exploit-

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ing her own specific skills) vs. that everyone is actually learning the same things and achieving the same educational goals. But teachers, who are the ones in charge of "making it work", must have a clear idea of what they are doing and with what aim.

What do teachers do? How do they organize the work? The survey shows that heterogeneous group work is the most common choice, but homogenous group-work is emerging as a viable solution. It highlights some risks related to heterogeneous group-work: that the best do not really profit from the activity or that they leave aside the least performing in fear of getting a bad mark.

What do teachers get, with their current strategies? The relation between the groups' composition (heterogeneous vs. homogeneous) and its effects in terms of educational benefits for sure needs further exploration. We do not have full quantitative evidence yet (research is ongoing) but our perception is that heterogeneous groups are good for raising motivation and enhancing the students' own talents, while homogeneous groups enhance the students' sense of responsibility and promotes the achievement of all the benefits at stake in a specific educational experience. The survey also highlights the risk that benefits may be quite diverse if – in the case of heterogeneous group work – each student is given a specific role: as mentioned at the beginning, "writing texts" is not the same as "checking the deadlines". If such a heterogeneous activity is meant to enhance the least performing students' motivations, it may be useful: but the teacher must well be aware of what she is doing and what she is getting and what "inclusion" means in that specific case: i.e. that everyone felt involved but NOT that everyone learnt the same.

Our future research will better investigate the relationship between different kinds of organization within the groups and the generated benefits, making use of the Learning4All portal, which is currently being filled with new material from real experiences run at school.

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