Between difficulties and opportunities:
The social representation of special support teachers

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The Social Representation theory studies the factors of consent allowing individuals to orientate themselves, to order and to control their social world. This theory has also been used in research on several professions. The aim of our research is to detect if there is any consensus about the Social Representation of Special Support Teacher (SST) profession. We are interested in the field of this Social Representation and in the factors contributing to its construction. We interviewed 56 SSTs during their practice training. The following topics were investigated: the semantic universe linked to the profession; the abilities and competences ascribed to the SST; the motivation about their professional choice; and, the motivation they ascribed to others for application of removal. Results are presented in a descriptive way using multidimensional analysis, stressing common elements and organizing principles which orient individual positions.

Around the half of '70s, with the overcoming of special classes and the inclusion of children with handicap in the common classes, the profession of Special Support Teacher (SST) was set up. The Italian law on handicap (L.104/'92) defines its professional role and establishes the common responsibility with regular teachers of sections and classes where they operate. We can observe that SSTs were considered as an element of the symbiotic dyad teacher-pupil in the past, while today they assume new tasks and an active role in the school-society relationship. In particular, the concepts of integration, the networks inside and outside the school, the psychological and pedagogical competences acquired with trainings[1], become more and more important.

It can be assumed, as it happens for other educational professions (Ongari, Schadee, & Molina, 1999), that competences, images, satisfaction and experiences are in relation to contextual variables (i.e. type of school, positioning, organizational climate) and individual variables. Or it can be assumed that, in a homogenous group, like the one of SSTs, during training, consensual elements, converging ideas, thoughts, opinions, images and attitudes emerge.

From this point of view, Serge Moscovici defines the Social Representations as value systems, ideas and practice with twofold functions: first to define an order that allows the individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to control it; then to give a code for naming and classifying, without any ambiguity, the communication between members of a community (Moscovici, 1961; Farr & Moscovici, 1984).

Therefore, consensus is an important aspect of Social Representations and it can be defined as a common map to be confronted with cognitive and acting realities (Fraser, 1994; Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). According to structural perspective (Abric, 1988; Flament, 1992), as a socially shared element, consensus corresponds to the *central system*, called also nucleus of the representation: it carries out a *generative function* that forges the elements of the representation, and an *organising function* specifying the nature of links among those elements. The *peripheral system*, instead, is the interface between the central system and the variety of the specific individuals as well as their daily life contexts. The central system of Social Representation maintains relative organisation, coherence and stability (although it demonstrates its dynamics in time), while the peripheral system accounts, in a flexible way, for variability and differences between individuals and groups.

Several studies that refer to Social Representation theory, deal with profession, for example with psychologists

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and teachers (Palmonari & Zani, 1992; De Paolis, 1990; Gilly, 1992; Ochanine, 1978).

Can we speak about consensus regarding the Social Representation of SSTs? What is the field of this representation, the articulation of elements, and if they exist, what are the organising principles regarding such common knowledge? Those questions gave rise to this study. We expect nearly a consensus on the fact that this profession consists in a concrete aid to a child having difficulties and that such aid should be carried out in several shapes inside the school system. Nevertheless, we don't know the specific forms of the aid, neither the SSTs' competence, motivations, satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors, nor the latent dimensions underlying such representation.

Aims

The study analyses the semantic universe linked to SST profession, its abilities and competences, and the ascribed motivations for professional choice and for removal. We propose to adopt a descriptive point of view, separately analysing the results in each section and emphasizing consensual elements; subsequently we propose to shift towards latent dimensions with qualitative and quantitative analysis of the answers to open questions.

Sample

Our sample is composed of 56 subjects who, at the moment of the study, were attending their training as SSTs

Table 1

Description of the sample

	N	%
Sex		
Males	7	13%
Females	49	87%
Total	56	100%
Age		
Range	21-53 years	
Mean age	33 years	
Degree		
Bachelor degree	31	55%
Graduation in Motor Sciences	9	16%
Graduation in Pedagogy/Psychology	5	9%
Other graduations	11	20%
Occupation		
Applying for the first job	17	30%
Temporary teaching	30	54%
Other jobs	9	16%
Professional Experience		
No experience either as teacher or as SST	16	29%
Short experience as teacher, no as SST	14	25%
Long experience as teacher, no as SST	9	16%
Some experience as teacher and as SST	17	30%

promoted by the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Firenze. This group shows a prevalence of women (87%), with mean age of 33 years. Most of the subjects got the bachelor degree (see Table 1). Current occupation shows that 30% are searching for their first job without any experience in teaching; 41% had some teaching experience but not as SSTs; 30% have already experienced teaching as regular teacher or SST, even if not on a permanent staff.

In order to understand the real characteristics of SST in Italy, some data emerge from a report of the Ministry of Education about "Handicap and school: data about integration" (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2001). In 1999/2000, SST were nearly 8% of all teaching staff; it's a young population mostly about 26-45 years old, their mean age is younger than the one of the general population of teachers. Moreover, we must observe that, particularly in preschool and primary school, more than half of SSTs are not on staff teachers (with part-time or annual agreement).

METHOD

Instruments

We used a questionnaire with open-ended questions to analyse motivation to choose this profession and the abilities needed to carry it out; through the collection of free associations produced by stimulus words we analyse the semantic field of SST. The data were analysed with qualitative and quantitative methodologies; as regards the last ones, in particular, we referred to multidimensional analysis (Doise, Clémence, Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993).

Procedure

In order to evidence the *semantic field* of this profession, in the first area of the questionnaire, we asked SSTs to answer to each of eight stimulus using two freely associated words, introduced one by one: Special Support Teacher, Integration, Handicap, Learning, Isolation, Resource, Autonomy, Prejudice. The stimulus words were selected following interviews carried out in the preliminary phase of the study and represent, from our point of view, a meaningful part of the semantic universe of this profession.

The subjects produced a set of 896 associations (56 subjects, 8 stimulus words, 2 associations for each stimulus word). We differentiated 297 various terms. The terms derived from a stimulus word represent a dictionary.

In a successive step we grouped the synonyms and reduced the words to 158 terms, joining, for instance, coop-

eration and collaboration, reference person and guide, specialized and specialization and so on. On these dictionaries we constructed a matrix calculating the likeness among dictionaries through the index of Ellgard[2]. We used this matrix in a Multidimensional Analysis (MDS, Alscal procedure) to distinguish the latent dimension of the Social Representation field.

A second area of the questionnaire was about *professional abilities* of Special Support Teachers: Which characteristics and abilities should SSTs have in order to adequately carry out their profession? This open-ended question was asked to our sample of teachers. 64 various abilities for a set of 159 quotations[3] were produced; every subject, in fact, could indicate as many abilities as he wished.

In the third area of the questionnaire we asked teachers to indicate the motivations about their choice of SST profession. We collected 95 different sources of motivation (it was an open ended question, then each subject could indicate more than one motive). The last, area of the questionnaire refers to the alleged reasons believed to be used by the already working SST for requesting to a shift to regular place.

RESULTS

Free associations when the stimulus word is "Special Support Teacher"

We propose a preliminary qualitative analysis of the associations to the definition of SST profession when the stimulus word is "Special Support Teacher". We collected 112 associations, grouping them on the basis of their meaning and belonging to some sovraordinate categories. A first group of associations links to *Professional competences*, with terms like *knowledge, preparation, vocational training* and *specialization*. A second group refers to *Help relationship*, grouping associations like *mutual aid, solidarity, support*, and *reciprocity*. A third group stresses an *Affective dimension* through terms like *love, affect, softness, sensitivity, patience*. We called *Relational dimension* another

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[2] We obtain this index dividing the number of words common to the two dictionaries by the square root of the product of the number of the words in each dictionary. It varies from 0 to 1: the higher the proportion of common words, the higher the index (Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1996).

[3] We call "quotation" the absolute frequency of each mentioned ability.

group of words that comprises: *collaboration, cooperation, sharing, exchange, integration*. Other terms refer to *Difficulty: handicap, pain, desperation, obstacle, limit, deficit*. A *Motivational dimension* emerges as last one and collects terms like *passion, mission and motivation*. These groups constitute, in our perspective, a first net of meanings associated with the profession. This first and general analysis is meaningful because it defines, at a qualitative level, dimensions, which anticipate what will emerge from the following quantitative analyses.

The latent dimensions of semantic universe

On the dictionary analysis, three dimensions appear with stress = 0,17 and 42% of explained variance (see Table 2).

Dimension 1 opposes SST and *Autonomy* to *Learning* and *Integration*. This dimension refers to *Competence* of SSTs, their autonomy and professional aims, i.e. to promote learning processes and integration of pupils.

Dimension 2 is a social one and it opposes *Prejudice* as a psychological issue (attitude) to *Isolation* as a concrete exclusion of the others (behaviour). The meaning of this dimension is *Exclusion*.

Dimension 3 opposes individual difficulty (*Handicap*, problem, disease) to opportunity, *Resource* and *Integration*. We called it *Difficulty/Opportunity*.

This analysis supplies a better understanding of the latent factors, the dimensions and their meanings that contribute to orient the semantic universe of SST profession.

Table 2

Results of Multidimensional Analysis (Alscal procedure) on dictionaries

	Dimension 1 Competence	Dimension 2 Exclusion	Dimension 3 Difficulty/ Opportunity
Special Support Teacher	1.91	-.17	.64
Autonomy	1.18	.45	-.13
Prejudice	.22	1.70	-.37
Resource	.16	-.99	-1.13
Handicap	-.28	-.18	1.73
Isolation	-.31	-1.67	.15
Integration	-1.06	.48	-1.29
Learning	-1.81	.37	.70

Note: The dictionaries order depends on their positioning on dimension 1.

Professional abilities of Special Support Teachers

We analysed all the answers and we made specific groupings (see Table 3) each presenting various and more or less frequent quotations.

The first grouping pertains *Personality characteristics* and collects 35 various terms (more than half of all terms). About half of the quotations of this group addresses to few abilities (*patience, sensitivity, optimism, empathy, creativity, open-mindedness*), while the other half addresses to a wide array of abilities, each one mentioned only once or twice. It's therefore a heterogeneous grouping of abilities, some of which are much more representative than others.

Specific competences is the second group. It collects 21 various terms each one with only one or maximum two quotations: *Mediation skill, Listening skill, Understanding people skill*. It's a heterogeneous group pertaining quite many specific competences, none of which is more quoted than others.

The third grouping is *General competences*: the four generated terms (*professionality, preparation, competence*) collect 38 quotations. It's a group whose terms are few but general in their meaning.

Last group is *Motivation*: it has four generated terms and 13 quotations (*passion, motivation, interest*). While the terms are few and do not obtain high quotations, they represent however an important issue associated to profession.

Motivation for professional choice

The answers about motivations were collected in three categories:

* *Job opportunities*: a safe job, early entrance into the list of Public Education teachers, economic needs, stable occupation.

Table 3
Groups of more quoted professional abilities

Groups	Number of various terms	More representative abilities in grouping	Number of quotations*	Number of quotations in grouping
Personality characteristics	35 (55%)	Patience	19	84 (53%)
		Sensitivity	12	
		Optimism	5	
		Empathy	5	
		Creativity	5	
		Availability	4	
Specific competences	21 (33%)	Mediation skill	2	24 (15%)
		Listening skill	2	
		Understanding people skill	2	
General competences	4 (6%)	Professionality	13	38 (24%)
		Preparation	12	
		Competence	11	
Motivation	4 (6%)	Passion	5	13 (8%)
		Motivation	4	
		Interest	3	
Total	64 (100%)			159 (100%)

* Column of most quoted abilities.

Table 4
Motivations for the choice of SST profession

	First motivation	Following motivations	Total
Job opportunities	20 (p=.36)	10 (p=.25)	30 (p=.31)
Motivation for aid	21 (p=.38)	12 (p=.30)	33 (p=.35)
Other motivations	14 (p=.26)	18 (p=.45)	32 (p=.34)
Total	55	40	95

p = simple likelihood;
note: 1 subject did not answer

- *Motivation for aid*: need to be useful, to make something for other people, to help who is in need.

- *Other motivations and interests*: a specific interest in the profession, natural abilities for helping professions, much tolerance towards other people, interest in one's own mental enrichment, coherence with one's own feelings.

If we consider the total number of motivations, we see three groups (see Table 4, column Total) distributed in a uniform way. In our analysis we also considered the order of motivations distinguishing the first quoted and the following ones. As first answer, *Motivation for aid* and *Job opportunities* have the greater probability to be expressed and are 74% of all the first answers (p=.38 and p=.36). Then the category *Other motivations* (p=.26) follows. For successive answers the order is reversed: *Other motivations* has the higher likelihood (p=.45), while *Motivation for aid* (p=.30) and, finally, *Job opportunities* (p=.25) follow.

Table 6

Motivations attributed to demands for passage to regular place

	Frequency	%
Too hard work (heavy, too difficult, too involving...)	25	33.3
Lack of motivation (burn-out, frustration, impotence, dissatisfaction.)	16	21.3
Second choice (an easy way for getting a stable work, the only way for enter in the school-system,...)	14	18.7
Difficulties with colleagues (lack of collaboration,...)	7	9.3
The regular place is more rewarding	5	6.7
Need for change, new experiences	4	5.3
Lack of social appreciation	2	2.7
A continuous training and professional updating is needed	1	1.3
Lack of natural bent	1	1.3
Total	75	100.0

Note: 1 subject did not answer

The demands for transfer to regular place

We asked our subjects to hypothesize how many already working SST would ask for shift to regular position, after their 5 year compulsory teaching period as SST (see Table 5). 75% of the answers actually concentrate in the categories *many* and *a lot*.

A professional image with a wide turnover emerges, as the subjects hypothesize a high number of demands for removal to regular place. In the following question we asked to hypothesize the motivation for the choice of removal. We collected 75 explanations and we grouped them in 9 categories (Tab.6). The first, second and third category (*Too hard work, Demotivation and Possibility to enter earlier in steady staff*) collect more than 75% of all answers.

Table 5

How many teachers ask for removal to regular place after five compulsory years as SST?

	Frequency	Percentage
Nobody (0%)	0	0
Few (1-10%)	4	7.1
Quite (11-20%)	10	17.9
Many (21-30%)	18	32.1
A lot (more than 30%)	24	42.9
Total	56	100.0

CONCLUSIONS

We propose now a synthesis of what emerged in the previous sections, presenting a scheme illustrating the map of consensual elements of representation. First of all, we assume that Social Representation of SST has a nucleus with the following elements:

- a helping relationship with a child with difficulties,

- an educational action in school context,

- motivation/passion towards the profession (feel within, natural bent),

- the competences (you need to know how to make it),

- some personality characteristics as patience, sensitivity, optimism.

In our opinion these elements are a basis for SSTs representation and they are crucial since their absence would make the representation fail or dramatically change. In other words, they constitute the identity of the representation.

The teachers of our inquiry, beyond sharing these elements, articulate the Social Representation of SST through some further and more detailed organizing principles. These principles constitute the peripheral system of the representation; such elements are important in order to understand to what extent are they more elaborated and specific than the nucleus of the representation.

The consensual elements of the representation and the various levels of analysis are represented in Figure 1. In the
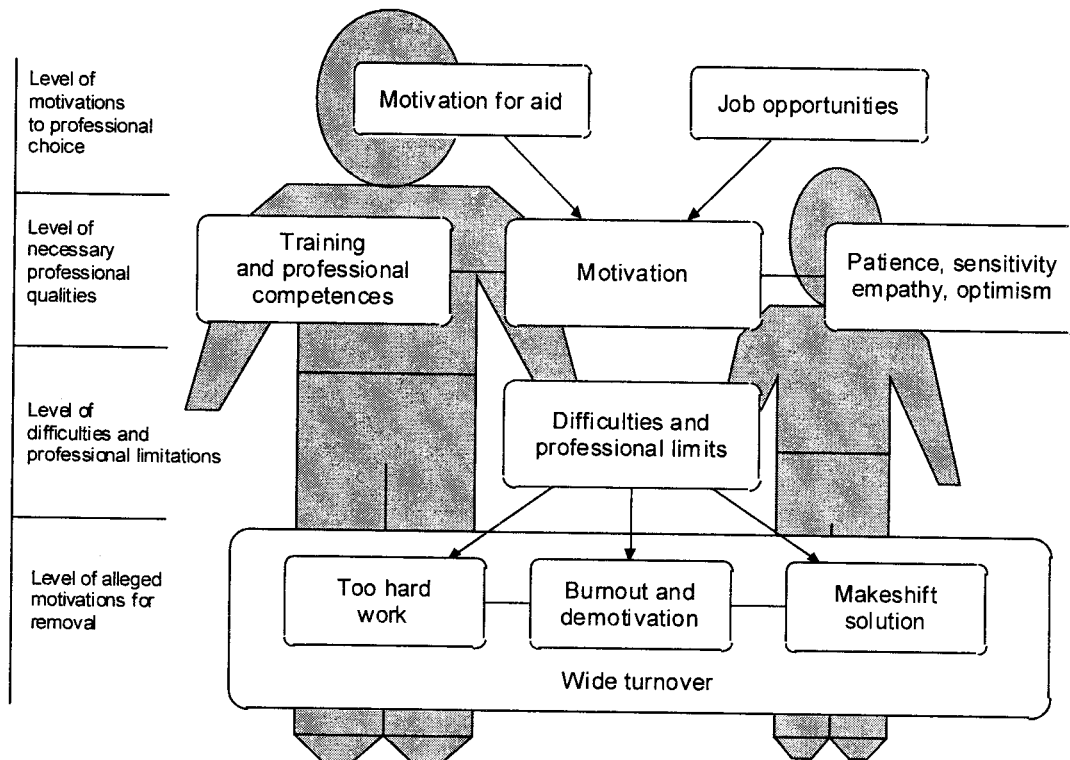
Fig.1 A scheme of the representation

upper zone we consider the entrance in to the profession (motivations for choice and necessary abilities) while, in the lower zone, we consider difficulties and motivations for removal.

Motivation is a recurrent topic: it appears at choice time (motivation for aid, job opportunity), as necessary for this profession and also as element of satisfaction (passion for this profession). We must also take account of the fact that the enrolment as SST represents a way for getting a stable agreement as a common teacher in school and consequently, some of SSTs consider this professional choice as temporary. Patience, sensitivity, empathy and optimism are other necessary abilities beyond motivation, competence and professional preparation. The lower part of the scheme points out the many explanations for asking to shift to regular place. Such phenomenon is overrated: 75% of our subjects hold that transfer demands are from "many" to "a lot", pertaining beyond 20-30% of all teachers, while the real data (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2001) pertain about 12%.

The issues or dimensions emerging from our results are few. First is the *difficulty/opportunity* dimension: speaking about handicap and disease state, and at the same time also on hypothesis of resource, opportunity, and potential de-

velopment. A second dimension is *motivation/competence*: it appears, as we have seen, in numerous areas and we assumed it as element of the nucleus of the representation. Third dimension is the *individual/social* one. It constantly sustains a need for individual intervention with the child and, at the same time, the aim to favor his autonomy, his "do it yourself" and peer-group integration (social participation). There is a risk to close the relationship between SST and child, implicitly favouring exclusion phenomena (isolation, prejudice, discrimination) towards both of them. To be aware of this risk is certainly more actual today when the SST's training is socially and culturally developing.

The elements of the peripheral system stress the need for professional advancement and dynamism. We suppose that many difficulties in everyday work of SST are due to on the resistance of some schools where only few social agents are aware of new topics like class-integration, cooperative group-work, and SST as an opportunity for every pupil like for common teachers. In our hypothesis, such elements are not a part of the representation nucleus but they pertain to the peripheral system; they are shared elements by our group of SST and, probably, shared also by many other persons; but there will be obstacles and resistance until it become generalized knowledge. How to rec-

oncile the risk of a narrowing vision of SST offering just an individual intervention, with the enhancement of personal autonomy, class integration and development of social relationships, constitutes one of the daily challenges of this profession.

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