

## **The Impact of Sensory Overload on Students on the Autism Spectrum in Italian Inclusive Classrooms: Teachers' Perspectives and Training Needs**

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**Abstract :** Background: Sensory issues are now considered one of the key aspects in defining and diagnosing autism, changing the perspectives on behavioural analysis and intervention in mainstream educational services. However, Italian teachers' training is yet not specific on the topic of autism and its sensory-related effects and this research investigates the teacher's capability in understanding the student's needs and his/her challenging behaviours considering sensory perceptions. Objectives: The research aims to analyse mainstream schools teachers' awareness on students' sensory perceptions and how this affects classroom inclusion and learning process. The research questions are: i) Are teachers able to identify student's sensory issues?; ii) Are trained teachers more able to identify sensory problems than untrained ones?; iii) What is the impact of sensory issues on inclusion in mainstream classrooms?; iv) What should teachers know about autistic sensory dimensions? Methods: This research was designed as a pilot study that involves a multi-methods approach, including action and collaborative research methodology. The designed research allows the researcher to catch the complexity of a province school district (from kindergarten to high school) through a deep detailed analysis of selected aspects. The researcher explored the questions described above through 133 questionnaires and 6 focus groups. The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research were analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results: Mainstream schools teachers are not able to confidently recognise sensory issues of children included in the classroom. The research underlines: how professionals with no specific training on autism are not able to recognise sensory problems in students on the spectrum; how hearing and sight issues have higher impact on classroom inclusion and student's learning process; how a lack of understanding is often followed by misinterpretations of the impact of sensory issues and challenging behaviours. Conclusions: As this research has shown, promoting and enhancing the importance of understanding sensory issues related to autism is fundamental to enable mainstream schools teachers to define educational and life-long plans able to properly answer the student's needs and support his/her real inclusion in the classroom. This study is a good example of how the educational research can meet and help the daily practice in working with people on the autism spectrum and support the training design for mainstream school teachers: the emerging need of designed preparation on sensory issues is fundamental to be considered when planning school district in-service training programmes, specifically declined for inclusive services.

**Keywords :** autism spectrum condition, scholastic inclusion, sensory overload, teacher's training

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