



# Covert-overt prejudices towards the intellectual disabilities at school: A study on teachers and non-teachers of southern Italy

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## Abstract

Intellectual Disabilities (ID) is a neurodevelopmental disorder with considerable individual variability in type and severity. Due to overt and covert prejudices around ID, however, society tends to generalize this condition. Also, in schools, teachers' attitudes toward students with IDs often differ from those toward regular students. The purpose of this study is to examine the levels of overt and covert prejudices toward ID of curricular and support teachers and non-teachers, in a sample of Southern Italian citizens, by evaluating age, gender and socioeconomic differences, as well as the associations of prejudice with education about and contact with ID. Six hundred and sixty-four participants (484 F; 38% teachers), 18–70 years old ( $M = 38.72$ ;  $SD = 14.79$ ) participated in the study. The *Modern and Classical Prejudices Scale* was administered in paper and online forms. Sociodemographic measures, as well as measures around ID education and contact with people with ID were collected. The results show that teachers had higher levels of classical prejudices compared to non-teacher participants. Teachers of primary schools showed higher levels of classical and modern prejudices. No gender and socioeconomic status (SES) differences were found in the whole sample. The entry of children with Intellectual Disabilities into primary school can be strongly influenced by teachers' prejudices. Therefore, the need for teachers' information and training on Intellectual Disabilities is evident.

**Keywords** Intellectual disabilities · Prejudice · School inclusion · Special educational needs · School teachers

## Background

Intellectual Disabilities (ID) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that arises at an early age and involves intellectual, adaptive and social deficits at various levels of severity (American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2013). IDs have strong individual variability (Schalock et al., 2002); for example, a person with an Intellectual Disabilities could have relatively intact adaptive functioning, around which educational interventions produce good outcomes (APA, 2013), thus resulting in acceptable functioning in the social world (i.e., work, school). However, society tends to generalize Intellectual Disabilities as a whole syndrome with impairments in global domains (McCaughy & Strohmer, 2005). This could imply that society does not allow for the inclusivity of people with IDs because of its prejudices toward them, thus undermining their

potential well-being (Ouellette-Kuntz et al., 2010; Weisel et al., 1988).

Prejudice is an opinion that is formed on the basis of personal convictions and preconceptions, without real knowledge of the facts and people involved. From this perspective, prejudice strongly influences evaluation, which is often misleading. Furthermore, negative attitudes directed toward certain people can prevent them from achieving and pursuing their goals in life (Antonak & Livneh, 2000). Thus, prejudices and negative attitudes may hinder the social inclusion of individuals into different arenas, such as school and work, regardless of their specific limitations and disabilities (Marcone et al., 2016). In addition, prejudices and negative attitudes may cause people to limit themselves in the activities they choose to pursue.

The evaluation of people's prejudices and attitudes toward IDs can be an important indicator not only for implementing appropriate intervention programs, which are often focused on vocational training (Antonak & Livneh, 2000; Burge et al., 2007), but also for adequately training teachers toward the goal of improving the quality of life for students with IDs (McManus et al., 2010). The literature widely shows that socially inclusive processes in the presence of

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neurodevelopmental disorders are more or less directly related to the improvement of people's psychosocial well-being. The inclusion of people with IDs, in various settings, depends not only on their competencies but also on the attitudes that others have toward them (Antonak & Livneh, 2000; Diamond & Kensinger, 2002). From the perspective of inclusion, therefore, it is important to explore prejudices toward IDs in schools, in which different educational needs are presented.

Inclusion is based on the concept of social justice, according to which all students are entitled to equal access to educational opportunities, regardless of disability or any form of disadvantage (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2005). From this perspective, the governments of many countries support the inclusiveness of children and adolescents with disabilities or disadvantages within regular classrooms (Leyser & Kirk, 2004). Specifically, the Italian government has adopted legal regulations for these new and emerging needs.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, schools and teachers are required to adapt their educational models and teaching methods not only to the legislative changes but also to the students' individual characteristics. Nevertheless, prejudices and negative attitudes persist in educational settings.

According to some Italian authors (Canevaro, 2007; Ianes & Canevaro, 2008), the inclusion of Italian students with special needs of varying degrees of severity is still not satisfactory. School pull-outs, micro-exclusions and other forms of isolation of students with IDs remain higher compared to their classmates. These phenomena, often silent in nature, could be due, at least partially, to prejudice that views the nature of "special" needs as more biomedical (including motor abilities) than psychosocial (Canevaro et al., 2011; Ianes et al., 2011; Ianes et al., 2013; Marcone et al., 2016). In fact, the legislative changes alone do not ensure that the policy is favorably accepted by those on the frontline of its implementation, namely, the teachers. On the contrary, some studies underline that teachers' negative attitudes and/or expectations are significant barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018; Rose & Shevlin, 2017; Ross-Hill, 2009). In particular, some studies show that the severity of disability that teachers are expected to fit within their classrooms is inversely associated with their attitudes toward inclusion. In other words, the more severe a student's disability is in the classroom, the less positive is the teacher's attitude toward that student's inclusion (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Furthermore, the type of disability also appears to influence teachers' attitudes. Researchers argue that teachers are generally more supportive of including children with physical and sensory disabilities than those with intellectual, learning and behavioral

disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2010; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Ellins & Porter, 2005; Westwood & Graham, 2003). It could be possible that these biases in the scholastic context do not facilitate, but rather block the symptomatic improvements associated with the disabilities.

In light of the studies cited above, it is important to evaluate the levels of prejudices toward IDs, both for curricular and support teachers. Studies on prejudices tend to focus on two forms: classical and modern prejudices (Akrami et al., 2006; Marcone et al., 2019; Servidio & Marcone, 2020). The first form refers to direct or overt prejudice, while the modern form refers to subtle or covert prejudices (Akrami et al., 2006).

Previous studies on classical and modern prejudices toward IDs show that those with higher levels of prejudices toward IDs are men and older people (Marcone et al., 2019). Contrariwise, females and younger people show lower levels of prejudices toward people with IDs. Furthermore, the literature underlines that lower socioeconomic status is associated with high levels of prejudice (Akrami et al., 2006); however, this is not true in Southern Italy, where it seems there are no differences in overt and covert prejudices toward IDs that are related to socioeconomic status (SES) (Marcone et al., 2019).

## Aims

The main purpose of the present study is to examine the levels of both overt and covert prejudices toward Intellectual Disabilities in curricular and support teachers (from kindergarten to secondary schools), in a sample of Southern Italian citizens, compared to non-teacher participants, by evaluating any differences in gender, socioeconomic status and school levels in the teacher subsample. A secondary aim is to examine any associations between the teachers' knowledge about contacts with IDs and modern and classical prejudices.

## Method

### Participants

Six hundred and sixty-four subjects (177 males, 484 females, 3 missing) in the age range 18–70 ( $M = 38.72$ ;  $SD = 14.79$ ) were recruited on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate. Of these, 362 completed the socio-demographic questionnaire, while others chose to omit information relating to their educational or occupational level. The 362 subjects had a medium-high socioeconomic status (SES,  $N = 362$ ;  $M = 42.07$ ;  $SD = 18.22$ ; Hollingshead, 1975; Venuti & Senese, 2007) (Table 1).

Of the participants, 38% were teachers ( $N = 254$ ; age  $M = 51.47$ ; SES  $M = 55.38$ ), who were recruited in some of

<sup>1</sup> Italian Laws about Special Educational Needs: L. 104/92; L. 62/2000; L. 170/2010; D.M. 27/12/2012; C.M. n. 8 6/3/2013; Note 27/6/2013; L. 107/2015

**Table 1** Sociodemographic characteristics of the whole sample

Gender	Age					SES				
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DS</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DS</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Males	177	39.64	14.75	18	70	100	34.23	19.45	3	64
Females	484	38.35	14.81	18	66	259	44.93	16.89	3	64
Missing	3	42.67	15.63	26	57	3	55.33	4.72	50	58
TOT	664	38.72	14.79	18	70	362	42.07	18.22	3	64

SES Socio-Economic Status (Hollingshead, 1975)

Southern Italy's schools,<sup>2</sup> from (1) kindergarten (3%), (2) primary school (35%), (3) first grade (27%) and (4) second grade of secondary school (35%), while 410 (62%; age  $M = 31.73$ ,  $SD = 12.53$ ; SES  $M = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 6.57$ ) were non-teachers.

## Procedure

All participants gave their informed consent. The recruitment and testing of participants were done in conformance with the local Ethics Committee requirements and with the Declaration of Helsinki, 2008.

The battery of questionnaires consisted of a sociodemographic questionnaire for collecting data about gender, age and socioeconomic status, a brief list of questions about previous contact with and education about IDs, and the Italian version of the *Modern and Classical Prejudices Scale toward Intellectual Disabilities* (MCPS, Akrami et al., 2006; It. tr. Marcone et al., 2019).

All participants completed the questionnaires anonymously, 47% online and 53% in paper form at their convenience.

## Measures

**Modern and Classical Prejudices Scale (MCPS)** The MCPS (Akrami et al., 2006) is a questionnaire composed of 19 statements about people with Intellectual Disabilities (Italian version  $\alpha = .76$ ), divided into two scales investigating two forms of prejudice: (1) *Classical* (items 1 to 8;  $\alpha = .67$ ) and (2) *Modern* (items 9 to 19;  $\alpha = .70$ ) scales. Some item examples include “*People with intellectual disabilities often commit crimes*” (Classical scale) and “*People with intellectual disabilities are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights*” (Modern scale). The participants responded along a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

<sup>2</sup> Italian school system: 1) kindergarten (3–5 y.o.); 2) primary school (6–10 y.o.); 3) first grade of secondary school (11–13 y.o.); second grade of secondary school (14–18 y.o.)

**Education and Contact** Education refers to training about ID, and contact refers to took care of and met people with ID. These variables were evaluated through six statements translated from Akrami et al. (2006), such as “*Training about intellectual disabilities*” (Education) and “*Care about people with intellectual disabilities*” (Contact). The participants responded on a dichotomous scale (Yes/No). The answers to the statements allowed us to divide the sample into groups: have or have not received specific training on ID, have or have not had contacts and/or experiences in relation to ID.

## Data Analysis

Preliminary descriptive statistics were performed in order to describe the sample. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to first verify the differences between classical and modern prejudices in the whole sample. Then, several ANOVAs were carried out to verify any statistically significant differences in the modern and classical prejudices between gender, SES, teacher and non-teacher participants, curricular and support teachers, and the four school orders (1 = Kindergarten; 2 = Primary; 3 = First Grade of Secondary School; 4 = Second Grade of Secondary School).

In particular, a repeated measures ANOVA was carried out to verify the statistical differences between classical and modern prejudices. Two one-way ANOVAs were conducted to verify gender differences in both classical and modern prejudices. Then, two more one-way ANOVAs were performed to verify the differences related to SES (three levels: low, medium, high) for both classical and modern prejudices. After that, first, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to verify the differences between teachers and non-teachers in both classical and modern prejudices, and then another ANOVA was carried out between the four levels of the sub-sample of teachers (kindergarten, primary, first and second grades of secondary school) on both classical and modern prejudices. Subsequently, another one-way ANOVA was conducted to verify the differences between the curricular and supporting teachers in both classical and modern prejudices.

Finally, several factorial ANOVAs were carried out in order to identify any associations between both classical and

modern prejudices and education on ID (yes/no) and contact with ID (yes/no) in the whole sample, and between teachers versus non-teachers (two levels).

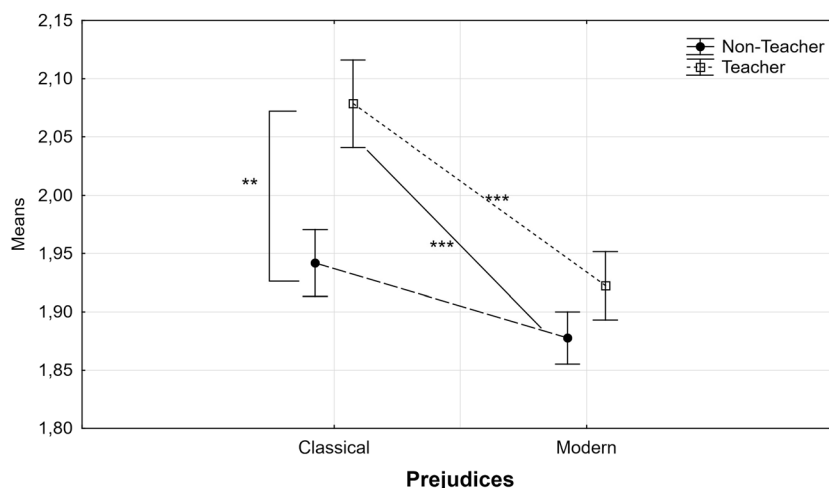
## Results

ANOVA in the whole sample shows a statistically significant difference between classical and modern prejudices ( $F(1, 688) = 18.415$ ;  $p < .001$ ): Overt prejudices were expressed more than covert ones. No gender differences in both classical ( $F(1, 680) = .347$ ;  $p = .556$ ) and modern ( $F(1, 680) = 2.331$ ;  $p = .127$ ) prejudices were found. No statistically significant differences were found in expressing classical ( $F(2, 358) = .893$ ;  $p = .410$ ) and modern ( $F(2, 358) = 1.241$ ;  $p = .290$ ) prejudices between the socioeconomic levels.

Further ANOVAs showed statistically significant differences in expressing only classical prejudices between the teacher and non-teacher participants,  $F(1, 687) = 8.445$ ;  $p < .01$  (Graph 1): Teachers expressed more overt prejudice than non-teachers. Statistically significant differences were also found in expressing both classical ( $F(3, 201) = 7.591$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and modern ( $F(3, 201) = 2.780$ ;  $p < .05$ ) prejudices between the four levels of schools (Graphs 2 and 3). Post hoc shows significant differences between the primary and second grades of secondary school, and the first and second grades of secondary school: Teachers of primary schools showed higher levels of classical prejudices compared to those of the second grade, as well as the first grade of secondary schools. Regarding modern prejudices, teachers of primary schools expressed higher levels of prejudices compared to those of the second grade of secondary schools.

**Graph 1** Analysis of variance of Classical and Modern Prejudices toward ID between Non-teacher and Teacher participants

**Graph 1. Analysis of variance of Classical and Modern Prejudices toward ID between Non-teacher and Teacher participants**  
 $F(1, 687) = 3.7626$ ;  $p = .053$   
Vertical bars denote +/- standard errors



Note. Bonferroni post-hoc \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

No differences were found between curricular and support teachers: Classical  $F(1, 242) = 2.622$ ;  $p = .107$ ; Modern  $F(1, 242) = .027$ ;  $p = .869$ .

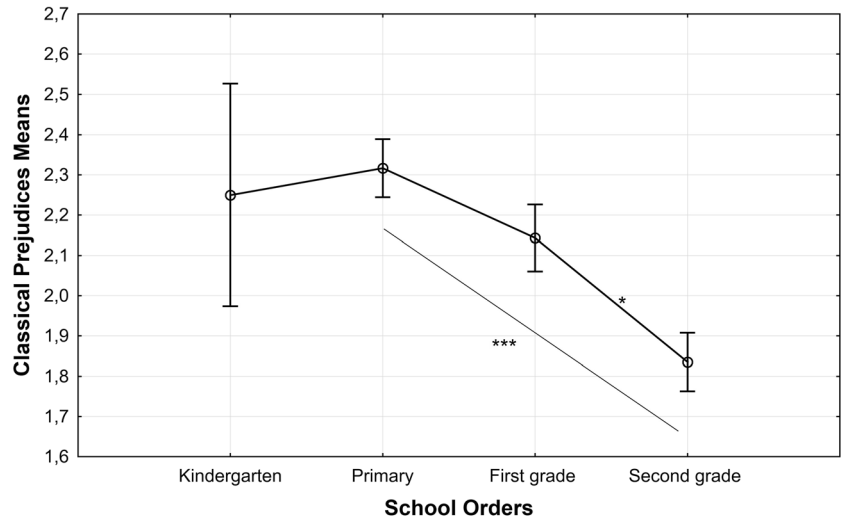
Factorial ANOVA conducted to explore any association between prejudices and education about ID showed no statistically significant differences ( $F(2, 377) = 1.9390$ ;  $p = .145$ ). Regarding contact with ID, considering the aspect of having met people with ID, neither an interactional nor teacher main effect were found, while a main effect of Met people with ID was found,  $F(2, 382) = 6.8320$ ;  $p = .001$  (Graph 4): Teachers who had not met people with ID in their life showed higher levels of both overt and covert prejudices. Finally, regarding contact again, a statistically significant association between being a teacher and taking care was found,  $F(2, 380) = 4.0604$ ;  $p = .018$  (Graph 5): Somewhat surprisingly, non-teachers who have taken care of a person with ID in their life expressed lower modern prejudices than teachers who have also taken care of someone with ID. Moreover, teachers who have taken care of a person with ID expressed higher levels of overt prejudices than non-teachers who have also taken care. Finally, teachers who have not taken care of a person with ID in their life expressed lower prejudices than non-teachers who also have not taken care of someone with ID.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the levels of prejudice in teachers, both in its overt and covert expression, compared to people with other roles in society (i.e., non-teachers). First, our results underline a clear difference within the whole sample in terms of expressing overt and covert prejudices toward people with intellectual disabilities. In disagreement with the

**Graph 2** ANOVA of Classical Prejudice toward ID between four school orders' teachers

**Graph 2. ANOVA of Classical Prejudice toward ID between four school orders' teachers**  
 Current effect:  $F(3, 201) = 7.592; p = .000$   
 Vertical bars denote +/- standard errors



Note. Bonferroni post-hoc: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

literature (Akrami et al., 2006), the study found that the expression of overt prejudices was higher than that of covert ones. This tendency to openly show one's own prejudices could indicate an absence or a lowering of social desirability in our sample, probably due to an acceptance of prejudices toward IDs in the general culture.

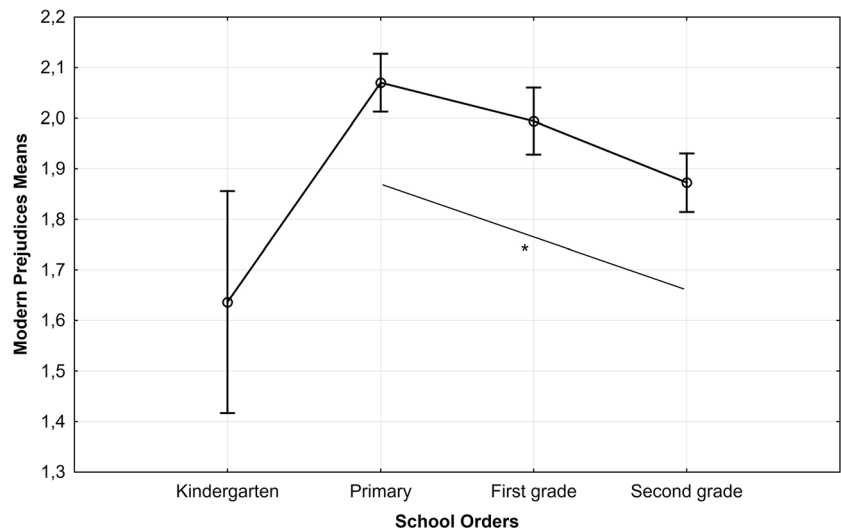
In our sample, overt and covert prejudices do not differ, either on the basis of gender or socioeconomic status, unlike what is reported in the literature (Akrami et al., 2006; Burge et al., 2007; Cuskelly & Gilmore, 2007; Ekehammar et al., 2000; Scior, 2011; Swim et al., 1995). These results could be explained by the specificity of the Italian legislation around

disabilities and special educational needs. For at least two decades, the full integration of people with disabilities in schools has been envisioned; therefore, everyone – regardless of gender or socioeconomic level – has had to deal with a person with disabilities. However, it seems quite clear that this result, which is not in line with the literature, should be further explored in future research.

Furthermore, our study underlines that teachers express more prejudicial views toward people with IDs than non-teacher participants. Also, by dividing teachers into four levels of schools, our results show that teachers of primary schools express higher levels of overt and covert prejudice. No

**Graph 3** ANOVA of Modern Prejudices toward ID between four school orders' teachers

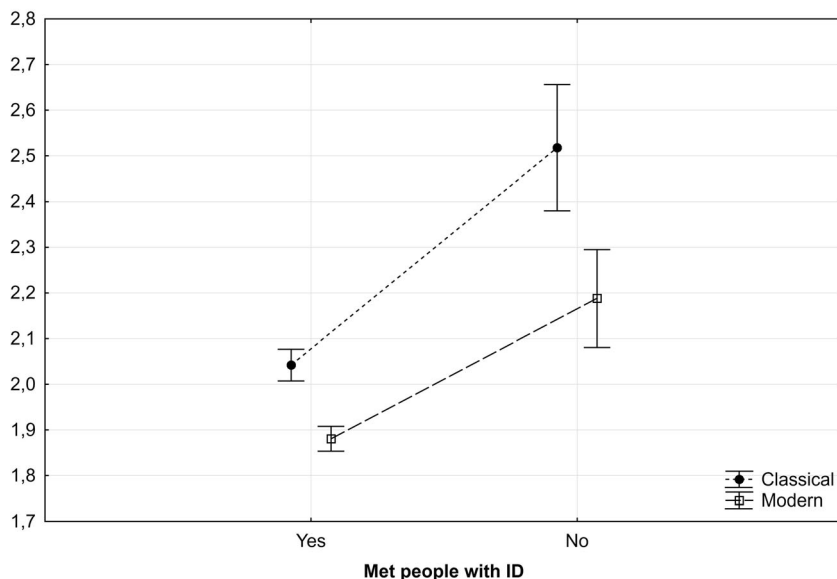
**Graph 3. ANOVA of Modern Prejudices toward ID between four school orders' teachers**  
 Current effect:  $F(3, 201) = 2780; p = .042$   
 Vertical bars denote +/- standard errors



Note. LDS post-hoc: \* $p < .05$

**Graph 4** Main Effect of Met people with ID on Classical and Modern Prejudices

**Graph 4. Main Effect of Met people with ID on Classical and Modern Prejudices**  
 $F(2, 382) = 6.8320; p = .001$   
 Vertical bars denote +/- standard errors

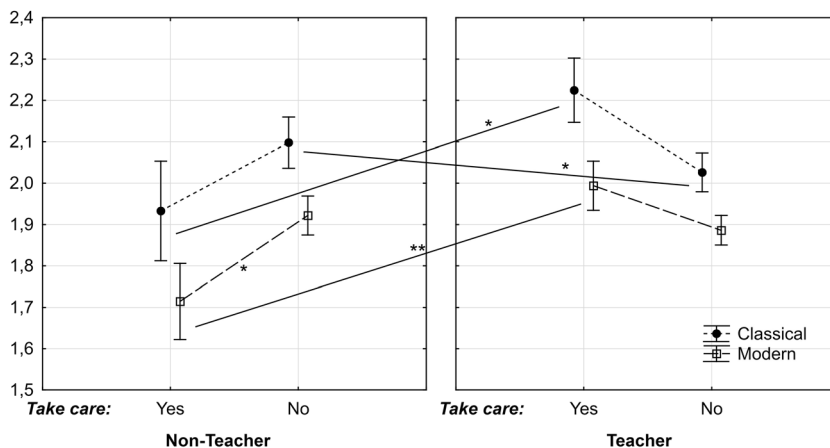


support vs. curricular teaching differences were found in the expression of prejudices. Furthermore, considering the levels of education and training about IDs, no effects were found: Support and curricular teachers expressed the same levels of overt and covert prejudices toward people with IDs as those who received special training. Schools should be places of inclusivity; however, teachers have a greater level of prejudice toward students with IDs than toward regular students. These results are doubly interesting. While Italian legislation pushes schools to welcome and nurture inclusivity, it is probable that Italian schools are still largely characterized by an individualistic and competitive educational structure, rather than a co-operative and supportive one that fosters inclusion. In this

sense, it is likely that teachers, more than the non-teaching population, are perhaps more cynical or less hypocritical, and tend to evaluate and organize their thinking around the skills and efficiency of their students, considering students with IDs as not up to the required regulatory expectations. This could have an impact on the beliefs and prejudices around the skills of people with IDs, thus undermining the goal of inclusion to which, paradoxically, the teacher is called. The competitive way in which teachers are required to work keeps them in a loop and increases their prejudice. Primary school teachers are the ones that mostly have prejudices in our sample, maybe because they are the first to detect the gap in basic skills (reading and writing, counting and speaking),

**Graph 5** Factorial ANOVA between Teacher and Non-Teacher and taking care people with ID

**Graph 5. Factorial ANOVA between Teacher and Non-Teacher and Taking care people with ID**  
 $F(2, 380) = 4.0604; p = .018$   
 Vertical bars denote +/- standard errors



Note. LSD post-hoc: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

compared to secondary school teachers, who are much more focused on specialized teaching (p.e., mathematics, history, technical education and sciences) and often entrust the students with IDs to their supporting colleagues. In addition, the levels of education and training about IDs could have a buffering effect on prejudices (McManus et al., 2010), and it is likely that the teachers who participated in our study have not been sufficiently trained about IDs. Contrariwise, differences were found in relation to having taken care of and met people with IDs. In line with the literature, previous contact, especially in terms of taking care, is associated with lower levels of prejudices toward people with IDs. In fact, it seems that having taken care of someone with an ID could be an important factor in breaking down prejudices (Marcone et al., 2016, 2019; McManus et al., 2010; Thomas & Rose, 2020).

However, there is a need for further research in this area, for example in exploring gender and socioeconomic levels in relation to prejudices in other study samples. Furthermore, future research could investigate prejudices toward people with IDs through other methodologies, such as an implicit association test about prejudices. A recent study of Wilson et al. (2019) showed that teachers' positive implicit attitudes were associated with special educational training, but teachers' implicit attitudes toward children with IDs did not relate to explicit attitudes.

In conclusion, "we have come a long way in the research on teacher education since the days of wiring teachers with transistorized receivers to modify their behavior in the classroom" (Zeichner, 1999, p. 12). In assessing the levels of prejudice that teachers in our study have toward people with IDs, incorporating students with IDs in inclusion processes in schools still seems far away. Only a combined cognitive and behavioral intervention can reduce the negative attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities; in particular, information-based training programs combined with experiential contact have been shown to have a significant impact on teachers' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities (Hassained, 2015). In light of the importance of the teacher's role, it is urgent to find a way to calibrate this imbalance. Special educational needs challenge teachers to a kind of "meta-level" of teaching. In other words, teachers should be able to integrate aspects of real life in their role, in an inclusive teaching that focuses concurrently on inclusive didactics and on social and civic aspects. This would involve a bidirectional process: the inclusion of persons with IDs in educational settings and the empowerment of civic responsibility in those without disabilities. It is therefore necessary to aspire to new teaching methods that are increasingly inclusive rather than competitive, especially in primary schools. It is also important to improve, monitor and verify teacher training programs, both curricular and supportive, thereby increasing and nurturing lifelong learning about people with IDs within schools.

**Availability of Data and Material** the database and the questionnaires are kept at the Department of Psychology, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli".

**Code Availability** Not applicable.

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## Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests** Author Roberto Marcone declares that he has no conflict of interest. Author Antonietta Caputo declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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