

INTRODUCTION

Back to the Core: Rediscovering the Power of Teacher Education Research

Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

In many contexts, the ongoing shortage of qualified teachers poses a threat to the right to quality education for all. Elsewhere, inadequate preparation undermines student learning and exacerbates inequalities, especially for learners with diverse needs or those from marginalized communities. Scientific research into teacher education – through theoretical frameworks and empirical studies – has sparked a broad and lively international debate on how to create training systems that are adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to social change. Over the past decade, noteworthy advances in teacher education research have driven innovations in teaching methods, curriculum design, and assessment practices. These include the integration of reflective practice models, teacher-led research, and collaborative professional learning communities as drivers of systemic improvement. Although the quality and passion of teachers are undoubtedly crucial to making a difference in any school, teacher education research is now more vital than ever for carefully and effectively examining the complex and challenging realities of schools and institutions that aim to educate children and young people.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education is therefore crucial, as it frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills¹. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies – ranging from longitudinal studies and mixed-methods approaches to participatory action research – that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, achieved through authentic, school-based experiences guided by expert mentors, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

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¹ OECD, *Unlocking High-Quality Teaching*, OECD Publishing, Paris 2025.

Within this framework, Italy's long-standing tradition of training specialized support teachers (*docenti di sostegno*) represents a distinctive and valuable contribution. Since the 1970s, Italy has pioneered inclusive education by progressively phasing out special schools and training teachers to work collaboratively with colleagues in mainstream classrooms to support students with disabilities. This experience – rooted in legislative milestones such as Law No. 517/1977 and reinforced by later reforms – has established a model of collaborative, school-embedded teacher preparation that is internationally recognized for promoting participation, equity, and the rights of all learners². The extensive expertise developed through decades of support-teacher training offers critical insights for the broader field of teacher education, particularly in fostering reflective practice, interprofessional collaboration, and attention to the diverse needs of learners.

Furthermore, significant reforms (DPCM 2023) are currently transforming Italy's initial teacher education system for secondary schools, enhancing partnerships between universities and schools. Central to these reforms are the Teaching and Learning Centers, conceived as genuine educational hubs within each university and as inter-university networks that will play a crucial role in the coming years³.

Tackling the long-standing issue of precarious employment – which has compromised the continuity of education that students rightfully deserve – has now become an urgent priority. Although recent measures mark an essential first step forward, a considerable imbalance remains between the number of prospective teachers available and the persistent shortages affecting specific regions and subject areas⁴.

One notable achievement of the 2023 reform is its resolution of a long-standing regulatory gap that had remained unresolved for over a decade. The reform also reinstates a model of initial teacher education based on active collaboration between universities and schools, extending this approach explicitly to secondary education.

An effective system of initial teacher education must provide clear and coherent guidance to universities, ensuring the quality and consistency of training programs. At the same time, it should foster strong, trust-based partnerships with schools to guarantee a seamless integration of theory and practice. Establishing such a virtuous cycle is essential to overcome the mutual hesitations and mistrust that too often separate these two key institutions, both fundamental to the education of young people. Emphasis should therefore be placed on direct school-based traineeships and indirect internship experiences supported by qualified tutors. Furthermore, the renewed framework for initial teacher education for secondary school teachers in Italy should be conceived as an interdisciplinary pathway, fostering deep and meaningful learning that goes beyond the superficial accumulation of fragmented knowledge. This perspective calls for strong connections among diverse epistemological approaches and for a dynamic dialogue between theoretical insights and practical experiences within the school context. There is no doubt that the system still has significant problems, inefficiencies and contradictions. These regulatory changes are still recent and will inevitably require further refinements, adjustments and improvements over the coming years⁵.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

² P. Aiello, C. Giacconi, L. D'Alonzo, A. Mura, & T. Zappaterra, *Ruolo e funzioni dell'insegnante specializzato per il sostegno. Riflessioni, studi, esperienze e ricerche sul profilo di una figura cruciale del sistema formativo nazionale*, in «Italian Journal Of Special Education for Inclusion», 2024, n. 12, pp. 15-18.

³ F. Magni, *Teachers' shortage and initial teacher education reforms in Italy: an overview*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», 2024, pp. 1-16.

⁴ F. Magni, V. Capriotti, *Addressing the teacher shortage crisis in Italy: among reforms, challenges and a case study*, in «Journal of Education for Teaching», 2025, pp. 1-15.

⁵ G. Bertagna, F. Magni (eds.), *Lauree e abilitazione all'insegnamento. Analisi del presente, tracce di futuro*, Edizioni Studium, Roma 2022.

This broad spectrum of studies – ranging from theoretical analyses to empirical research and case studies conducted in different contexts – highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

The texts are organized into five sub-themes, the same as at the conference, with the addition of the poster session:

- Teacher education and pedagogical perspective in uncertain times: history, theory, policies and practices.
- Digital innovation and artificial intelligence (AI): schools, teachers and students between real and virtual world.
- Inclusion in teaching and learning processes and school improvement.
- Teaching and learning challenges and professional development.
- School & work and the role of teachers in Vocational Education and Training.

We also wish to express our sincere thanks to the entire Scientific Committee and the additional experts who selflessly volunteered their time for the double-blind peer review process. Likewise, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the organizing committee and the wonderful ATEE community for making the conference such a memorable experience.

Francesco Magni – Nicole Bianquin

Chairs of the ATEE Spring Conference 2024