



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.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

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.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

### Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

**May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024**

**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

**Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni**



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Università degli studi di Bergamo

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# **Opening the black box of writing instruction in times of change: insights from Italian secondary school teachers**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the writing teaching practises of secondary school teachers in Turin, Italy, in the midst of challenges such as generative AI and post-pandemic changes in education. Semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers reveal a reliance on traditional methods, limited focus on revision and concerns about the impact of digital writing. Teachers report low self-efficacy and emphasise the need for practical, targeted training that integrates traditional and digital writing approaches. The findings point to systemic challenges, including student motivation and the burden of assessment, and call for tailored professional development to empower teachers to teach writing in a rapidly changing world.

**Keywords:** writing instruction; secondary school teachers; interviews; practice; professional development needs.

## 1. Introduction

Teaching writing is a complex task in which students must learn to plan, translate, transcribe, and revise while being encouraged to consider the context of the task and the needs of the intended reader (Bereiter & Scarmalia, 1987). Helping students master these multiple skills requires writing instruction that is carefully tailored to their needs, a long-term process that requires considerable effort and commitment from teachers at all grade levels (Kellogg, 2008). However, with the advent of generative AI (artificial intelligence, Cingillioglu, 2023; Anson & Straume, 2022), which can produce complete, error-free texts from simple prompts, urgent questions arise: Is writing instruction still useful? Are teachers' efforts well spent? Should we focus solely on teaching how to write prompts and leave the rest to technology?

To answer these important questions, we propose to begin with an examination of what it means for educators to teach writing today. Specifically, we want to understand the meaning of teaching writing from their perspective and the practises they use in the classroom. Examining the challenges they face, and their perceived training needs could also shed light on areas where teacher training can be improved, both at university level and through professional development programmes. These findings could help to better prepare teachers for the changing challenges of teaching writing in today's world.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 has significantly accelerated the shift towards digital learning, and the increasing use of generative AI (*text-to-text* models) has further transformed the educational landscape (Fleckenstein et al., 2024). In this context, secondary schools represent a particularly interesting research focus. Students in these schools typically participate in formal writing exercises at least once a month (*tema in classe* in Italy; Serianni & Benedetti, 2015) and are likely already integrating digital writing tools and AI into their everyday lives.

While international research has extensively investigated the practises of writing instruction, particularly in English-speaking contexts (Graham et al. 2024; Sheppard, 2021; Merga et al., 2021), there is a conspicuous gap in studies focusing on recent years in Italy (Boscolo & Zuin, 2015; Barbagli et al., 2017; Rossi, 2019). Researchers such as Graham and Harris have developed validated instruments to assess teachers' self-efficacy in writing instruction (Graham et al., 2001), their theoretical orientations for writing instruction (Graham et al., 2002), and their adaptations of instruction for struggling writers (Graham et al., 2003). These instruments, which are designed to assess teachers' perceptions of their practise and focus on the writing process (the primary focus of writing instruction in secondary school), are particularly appropriate for the objectives of the present study.

The aim of this study is to understand how Italian teachers have reacted to the changes of the last five years, including the increasing integration of digital tools, and eventually to analyse the impact of AI in writing instruction. Through interviews with teachers, we aim to find out what is happening behind the classroom doors from educators' perspective, filling a critical gap in the existing literature on the teaching of writing in Italy in recent years.

The results of this study will shed light on current practises of writing instruction in Italian classrooms. They are intended to help prospective teachers demystify the "black box" of writing instruction and better understand what happens in daily practise (Lampert, 2010; Shank & Santiago, 2019). By identifying the difficulties teachers face, this study aims to shift responsibility for these challenges from being the sole concern of individual teachers and schools to a broader societal problem. Finally, the study highlights the training needs articulated by the teachers themselves and offers valuable insights for the development of teacher training programmes in Italy and the promotion of a critical, informed approach to writing instruction in the digital age.

The research questions we want to answer with this work are the following:

RQ1. What practises do secondary school teachers in the city of Turin use to teach writing?

RQ2. What difficulties do these teachers encounter when teaching writing?

RQ3. What training needs arise from their experiences?

## 2. Method

A qualitative approach was chosen to answer these questions. The study used semi-structured interviews to comprehensively answer the research questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Brown & Danaher, 2019).

Key steps of the methodology included:

- **Interview design:** questions were based on an extensive literature review (Poch et al, 2020; Graham et al, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2016; Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Rossi, 2019; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006). The interview focused on background information, writing instruction practises, writing instruction conceptions (e.g., teachers' opinions about their self-efficacy, positive and negative aspects of writing instruction, students' writing motivation), and perceived need for professional development.
- **Validation:** Two secondary school teachers and a linguistics professor reviewed the questions for appropriateness.
- **Data processing:** The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed **using template analysis** (King, 1998; King & Brooks, 2016), a special type of thematic analysis. Template analysis enables the development of a hierarchical coding structure: the process begins with a preliminary coding template informed by the study's research questions and relevant literature on writing instruction (e.g. Graham et al., 2001; Rossi, 2019), which guides the creation of questions for the interview. At this stage, any ideas that the researcher has a priori about the topic are considered and his/her previous assumptions that led to the determination of the interview questions are taken into account when creating the codes. In reviewing the transcripts, the codes were iteratively refined: sub-themes were developed to capture nuances in the data, but the main themes remained the same. This method made it possible to systematically integrate both a priori and emergent themes. The final template was consistently applied to all interviews. The selection of quotes was based on the representativeness of the common patterns and the ability to illustrate the main sub-themes that emerged when analysing the interviews, as well as the interesting discrepancies between participants, identified during the coding process. One evident example is the COVID-19 aspect, which was not taken into account when the questions for the interviews were drawn up and only emerged in the coding phase.

The questions asked in the interviews are translated in the following table:

Writing teaching practices	<b>Q1</b>	How much time do you dedicate to teaching written composition within the hours allocated for teaching the Italian language?
	<b>Q2</b>	Do you explicitly teach students how to plan, draft, and revise their writing?
	<b>Q3</b>	Do you incorporate collaborative writing activities in your teaching?
	<b>Q4</b>	Do you encourage the use of technological tools to support written production?
	<b>Q5</b>	Do you recommend specific hardware or software for writing tasks?
	<b>Q6</b>	Do you personalise the requirements for writing tasks for your students?
	<b>Q7</b>	And what about the time?
Writing teaching conceptions	<b>Q8</b>	Do you feel effective when teaching writing?
	<b>Q9</b>	What do you think are the main advantages of teaching writing?
	<b>Q10</b>	And the disadvantages?
	<b>Q11</b> <b>Q12</b>	Do your students appear motivated to write? Are there specific types of assignments or tasks that you find particularly engaging or challenging for your students?
Professional development needs on writing instruction	<b>Q13</b>	Do you feel that you need additional in-service training for writing instruction?
	<b>Q14</b>	If so, what type of training would be most beneficial for your teaching practise: digital writing tools or traditional handwriting methods?

Table 1- Short version of questions asked during the interviews.

The study used the snowball sampling method (Parker et al., 2019) to recruit 20 secondary school teachers from the city of Turin. Participants represented different age groups and teaching experiences, as shown in Table 2. The interviews took place between July and December 2023.

Age	N	Secondary school	N	Teaching experience (in years)	N
21-30	0	Lower (also known as middle school)	10	> 5	0
31-40	1	Higher (also known as high school)	10	5 - 10	1
41-50	5			11 - 15	2
51-60	11	<b>Education background</b>	<b>N</b>	16 - 20	6
> 60	3	University degree in modern literature	14	21 - 25	3
		University degree in ancient literature	5	> 25	8
		University degree in pedagogy	1		
<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	Additional for only few teachers of the sample: specific training to be a teacher (SSIS, TFA, PAS, degree in pedagogy)	7		
Male	1				
Female	19				

Table 2 - Background information from the secondary school teachers interviewed

### 3. Results

In order to present the results in a concise and effective way, we will address each question of the interview and give an insight from the teachers' point of view in their own words (all sentences have been translated into English by the author but are the best possible translation of the original text).

#### 3.1 Writing teaching practices

Teachers generally reported spending about 1 hour per week on writing instruction (Q1 – 15 out of 20 teachers). The findings are particularly consistent with those of lower secondary teachers (who generally spend about 6 hours per week teaching Italian). At secondary level, teachers have greater difficulty in specifying the time spent on writing instruction (they also have only 4 hours for Italian lessons): They are more vague and find it more difficult to give an exact answer (5 could not estimate the time). Mostly they refer to the writing assessment they do (more or less) every month and emphasise that they tend to spend more time on grammar and writing lessons in the first years of high school (9th and 10th grade).

«So, normally, I'm telling you, normally, all classes have to do two written assignments per term, okay? This is the classic composition or essay—call it what you want, right? Obviously, there's a difference between the first two years and the final three years of high school. In the first two years, grammar is covered again, so phonology, morphology, and syntax » (Higher secondary, Male teacher in his 50s).

In the other years (from 11th to 13th grade), explicit writing lessons at high school level are rather rare according to the teachers. With regard to the second question of the interview (Q2), all interviewees stated that they spend 2 to 4 hours annually to explicitly teaching planning. However, drafting and revising are referred to be taught occasionally and in an unstructured way. For example, one teacher says about revision:

«While the rest of the class is doing something, individually we do the correction together because they still don't know how to do it. Keep in mind that... I didn't tell you that as a premise and maybe I took it for granted: these classes came from distance learning: they have written very little. So this work is a work that does not exactly correspond to a first, to a second class; that is, I did not do this work years ago, in middle school, but now I have to do it because they have missed that learning. They are not yet capable to do this, so they are not real lessons that I do but I correct together with them» (Higher secondary, Female teacher in her 60s).

From this extract, we can start to notice COVID-19's impact on teaching: it was profound and required remediation to close gaps. This was noted by 18 of the 20 teachers; the middle school teachers were particularly concerned about the loss of their students' skills. All teachers raised this issue when asked about digital didactics (Q4&5). Thirteen teachers stated that they link writing lessons with reading and literary examples (in Italian: *antologia*), mainly based on textbook content; all middle school teachers stated that this was their way of teaching:

«Many times, the "antologia" offers in my opinion - and in any case the textbook offers a constant indication for the work in the classroom - offers many possibilities: the pupils write after a text has been read and analysed and then they have to somehow rework it» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 40s).

Collaborative writing was criticised (Q3). Six teachers stated that they practised it, but others were sceptical (no patterns could be identified in relation to the age of the participants).

«Well... I really don't believe that the writing process is possible in a collaborative manner. It's very difficult to work collaboratively in writing. It's really really hard» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

Coming to the digital writing aspect, as already mentioned, all respondents in questions Q4 & Q5 described a before and after on the subject of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every single teacher stated that their teaching methods had changed during this time. Two thirds of the participants confirm that they have adapted their didactic approach, while one third (consisting only of older upper secondary school teachers) say that the time of the pandemic has left aftermath, but they are trying to return to a "normal" pedagogy in their classrooms and refer to the pre-pandemic period as a lost treasure. The use of Word or Google Documents is cited by all participants and some teachers describe it as a mixture of positive and negative aspects, such as the following:

« Well, especially during the lockdown, we used Google Docs, and in my opinion, the clear advantage is the ability to correct and produce a clean text. Those who have poor handwriting or students with learning disabilities (like dyslexia) have more opportunities to revise their work because they don't face the challenge of reinterpreting their own writing or struggling with disorder, if you know what I mean. [...] However, unfortunately, kids are kids. This happened to me, especially during the lockdown, when I assigned essays on certain topics. Several times, I found that students copied and pasted content they found online» (Higher secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

These simple but powerful words explain how teachers feel about the use of digital writing in their didactics or for homework. Interestingly, only 5 out of 20 teachers state that they think AI is important (it is important to bear in mind that the interviews were conducted in 2023, when the AI boom was just beginning), and it is the more experienced teachers who are concerned about this. One interviewee stated that:

« I don't think I'll ever assign essays to be done at home again, because one of my students told me that her sister, who is in high school, did an experiment with her classmates. There were 22 of them, and they had ChatGPT write their essays. It produced 22 different essays, and the teacher didn't notice. Then, to their credit, they admitted it to the teacher, saying, 'Look, professor, we didn't write the assignments, it was done by...,' but I think we're moving toward an era where homework assignments won't be feasible anymore. That's the big problem. So, written work must be done in class, collecting cell phones, watches, and so on. Because even in second grade, they're already savvy and might sneak in a phone. Unfortunately, that's the way it is... Even summarizing a fairy tale, ChatGPT does it in three minutes» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 60s).

Finally, regarding the personalisation of tasks (Q6 & Q7), all participants indicate that they personalise their written assignments, especially those during the monthly writing (*tema in classe*). Time is also individualised as much as possible, depending on the students' needs, e.g. if the 2 or 3 hours allocated to writing exercises are not enough, teachers allocate more time the following week so that students can finish their texts.

### 3.2 Writing Teaching Conceptions

Regarding teachers' opinions of writing instruction, professors (Q8) widely reported low self-efficacy; 14 out of 20 felt ineffective in teaching writing. Frustration was evident. When asked if they felt effective in their writing instruction, one teacher responded:

«Not at all. I mean, there are times when a student maybe gives you a decent essay, and in the next essay you read, they've unlearned how to write? What happened? Or they make the same mistakes again, you correct the same thing a thousand times. Then, they either learn spelling in primary school or they never learn it. It's crazy, though. It's crazy, it's crazy. [...] And not yet after three years, after five years, depending on how old the students are, they tend to be three, two or three, they never change » (Higher secondary, Female teacher in her 60s).

The view that students' skills are a monolithic, unchanging aspect is supported by 4 out of 20 teachers who state that writing is ultimately an 'art' that cannot be taught. When asked about the benefits and challenges of their work (Q9 & Q10), respondents state that the positive aspect is closely linked to the educative aspect of writing instruction. More than half of the interviewees stated that they really enjoy being literature teachers because they have access to the students' personal writings in their monthly writings (temi) and can have an inside perspective on the students, which allows for a closer relationship compared to teachers of other subjects. This educator, for example, expresses this very clearly:

«[Writing] is a very powerful channel to be used with caution, but I still think it's necessary and I'm not willing to reduce everything to summarising so that I can evaluate how students write [...] and if I believe in a didactic-educational approach then necessarily some purely didactical things for me become a little less relevant» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 30s).

Another teacher takes stock of the pros and cons:

« Teaching writing is very versatile. It allows you to do many, many things. And to enter, what I was telling you at the beginning, to get in deep contact with the kids. I, through writing, get to enter a little bit into their world and so I enjoy it. That is, in my opinion, the big advantage, where Italian teachers are the ones who often know the pupils best. The disadvantage is that it is difficult and that correcting essays is something that takes an immense amount of time. Sometimes, in fact, I admit that I get a bit angry thinking about other teachers who are paid like me but who have no papers to correct or who correct them very quickly. But I believe that only with this dedication can one achieve anything. Thus, the disadvantage is this, that it is complicated» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

According to the observations of all teachers (Q11 & Q12), students show more enthusiasm when the tasks allow for personal or imaginative expression:

« In my opinion, when the students have to talk about themselves it's always more motivating, and the ones that read a lot those really like when they have to invent stories. [...] Also my colleagues say the same» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

« when there are the essays of personal introspection I see them [*the students*] more convinced or even if I sometimes ask them to imagine situations, for example the idea of having a historical character speak, to say what the emotions of the one represented in the statue are... then yes, where there is to use a little more imagination or where there is to talk about oneself are the writings for which I see them enthusiasts.» (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

### 3.3 Professional Development Needs

Perhaps it is thanks to critical reflection during the interview that eighteen teachers emphasised the need for targeted further training measures when asked about their training needs for writing lessons (Q13). One of the most important demands of the interviewees is that the further training should be practise-orientated and scientifically sound. Two of them emphasised this:

« You have to be very practical. I mean, little theory and just... You [as a teacher] are an active, creative part of it, I mean, you create it together with the trainer » (Lower secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

« Probably it would be useful because it's a training that I do not have at all, I built the method through my experience, but a bit more scientific training might be useful» (Higher secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

Digital transformation was another area of focus. Teachers who answered positively to the previous question were asked whether the training should focus on digital or handwritten form (**Q14**); all indicated that both should be covered; for example,

« We are in an epochal change that has been here for decades, and the school needs to understand how to change, it can no longer be traditional, so obviously training would be very useful, and in my opinion, it should deal with both handwriting and digital writing » (Higher secondary, Female teacher in her 50s).

## 4. Discussion

The data presented above shows an interesting picture of what is happening in Italian classrooms. An important aspect to consider is the lack of representativeness of the sample: teachers were only interviewed if they were interested and took the time to do so, which may lead to a strong bias in the sample; even if it more or less reflects the actual age distribution of teachers, more than half of the teachers were at least 50 years old and had many years of experience. This could have strongly distorted the results. As the aim of the study was to present a specific situation and not to produce statistics, we nevertheless believe that all the results are helpful in answering the research questions. The analysis shows that the teaching of writing in Italian high schools still seems to be traditional, as the time devoted to writing in school is very small, as is the time teachers devote to teaching writing. In middle school, teachers tend to support and encourage more children in the writing process, which is more in line with what scholars describe as effective (Slavin et al. 2019; Graham et al., 2016).

The widespread critique of collaborative writing should be further analysed as it has strong roots in Italian pedagogy (e.g. the transformative and critical experience of the Barbiana school, Milani, 1967) and could be a feature of very traditional views on writing instruction or a more recent reaction to the changes in language teaching in Italy in the 1970s (e.g. *10 Tesi GISCEL*).

The fact that the pandemic has accelerated the growth of digital writing in schools raises new interesting questions that are worth addressing in future research, such as how much space this teaching should have in the curriculum. Teachers seem very convinced that handwriting should be retained in schools. We see this as a positive prospect in terms of the impact on students' brain development (Berninger et al., 2009). The personalisation of tasks is in line with Italian inclusive didactics, which pays particular attention to students' needs (through personalised learning plans). In general, the positive and negative aspects of writing instruction are reported to be balanced in daily practise, but the burden of writing assessment on teachers should at least be problematised. OCR technology and software customised for assessment could increasingly support this task.

It is also interesting to note that AI was explicitly mentioned only by 5 of the 20 participants, mainly in the context of homework interference: their answers suggest a lack of structured strategies for addressing AI's impact. This suggests that awareness of how AI challenges traditional notions of authorship and assessment is nascent but growing. Rather than integrating AI as a teaching tool, most participants saw it as a threat or, more neutrally, as a change to which they needed to adapt.

The high distribution of low self-efficacy perceived by the participants is very worrying as these teachers agreed to talk about their practises and we can assume that they should be at least somewhat aware when asked questions about their pedagogy. The difficulty of motivating students is also a challenge that could affect educators' perceptions of their effectiveness in a world where we are writing less and less. It is important that this aspect is addressed. One way to do this is to address the diffuse sense of educational need in writing instruction. If we begin to listen to the contextual, specific needs of educators in relation to their daily practise, it would be possible to develop in-service teacher training programmes that provide practical, effective training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Federighi, 2018). Such initiatives should bridge the gap between traditional

and digital pedagogy and enable teachers to deal with rapidly changing challenges (and last but not least, the effectiveness of these training programmes should also be evaluated).

## 5. Conclusion

As so often, further research is essential. The sample of this study was limited to the city of Turin, which led to distortions. Expansion to a regional or national level would provide a more comprehensive understanding of writing instruction across Italy, uncovering good practices, positive experiences, and areas for improvement. The interviews revealed promising strategies that, if shared through collaborative teacher networks, could benefit teachers nationwide even before they enter professional development.

In order to strengthen writing instruction, we propose four decisive steps:

1. Strengthening and enhancing teacher networks (such as the Italian Writing Teachers) to support professional learning and reflective thinking and to help teachers find contextualised responses to their students' writing instruction needs.
2. Expand the study of effective methods of teaching writing in the Italian context.
3. Boosting teacher confidence through targeted, practical support.
4. Addressing the challenges related to student motivation and digital integration.

Furthermore, the results point to a transitional phase in Italian writing instruction, in which digital tools are widely used but not yet fully integrated into the pedagogical framework. While platforms such as Google Docs have become commonplace, the use of generative AI in the classroom remains limited and is often viewed with concern: this suggests that critical research on the application of AI in writing instruction is crucial and should be carefully considered in a contextualised way to evaluate the potential positive and negative impacts of AI use in the writing classroom (Liu et al., 2024). Critical reflection on AI at the time of the interviews does not yet help us answer the question of whether and how AI is relevant to teach writing from the teachers' perspectives. Based on the general feedback we received during the interviews, we can safely say that writing instruction is a relational act of cultivating student voice, and the use of AI has played little role in Italian classrooms so far. The reported low self-efficacy of teachers in teaching writing is extremely worrying, even if it is not surprising given the rapid development of digital tools and generative AI. Universities and teacher educators need to critically analyse this and other data and develop tailored, context-specific professional development programmes. These initiatives can empower educators, bolster their confidence and foster impactful change in their teaching practise.

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