



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

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

May 29th – June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Università degli studi di Bergamo

2025

BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS ATEE Spring Conference 2024. Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives / Nicole Bianquin, Francesco Magni (edited by) - Bergamo: Università degli studi di Bergamo, 2025

ISBN: **978-88-97253-27-3**

DOI: [10.62336/unibg.978-88-97253-27-3](https://doi.org/10.62336/unibg.978-88-97253-27-3)

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<https://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/309209>

An event organised by:

Dipartimento di Scienze Umane e Sociali, **University of Bergamo** // www.dsus.unibg.it

CQIIA – Centro per la Qualità dell’Insegnamento, dell’Innovazione didattica e dell’Apprendimento, **University of Bergamo** // www.cqia.unibg.it

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The contributions published in this book of proceedings have been evaluated through a double-blind peer review process. We would like to thank the members of the Scientific Committee, as well as the many other professors, researchers and experts who agreed to act as reviewers.

Service Learning in teacher education for soft skills development

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Abstract

It's essential today that teachers have a wide range of soft skills (SS), fundamental for personal growth. SS, in fact, represent a dynamic combination of cognitive, metacognitive, practical and intellectual skills. They have a transversal nature and allow student to improve their performance in their studies and in the world of work. From this perspective, Service Learning can promote and improve learning process and the development of SS.

Recently, thanks to different SL projects, we have attempted to explore how this approach can contribute to enhancing responsible student learning and developing a wide range of skills required for teacher training. We present three projects started into the degree course in Primary Education Sciences (LM85bis):

- 2020/2022: Service e-learning project "Nobody left behind", to design and implement educational and enhancement courses for primary school pupils in Palermo. 869 students that attend LM85bis course were involved in this project, with the aim of creating educational paths for vulnerable students in Palermo. In total we provided 60,000 hours of distance learning, and all the activities favoured cognitive stimulation and the development of motivation for pupils' learning and the development of skills and deep awareness in teachers.
- 2022/2023: [P.R.] A.S.S.I. "Learning helps, serving teaches": aimed at promoting educational and training activities aimed at minors in Ballarò – Albergheria district of Palermo. There was initial distance learning (4 meetings, 16 hours in total), thanks to which students learned operational models, reflective and relational skills, metacognitive and research skills.
- 2024/2025: we introduced 2 cfu of SL activities in the first year of the course which counts 400 students. The "SL in Sicily" project aims at promoting the design and implementation of educational and enhancement courses for pupils of Sicilian primary schools. The project involved initial training and activities for approximately 400 first-year students.

Keywords: service learning; soft skills; teacher training; music education; innovative learning.

1. Background and theoretical framework

Society and context influence learning and vice versa. This is certainly not new, but a condition that certainly still exists. Therefore, ensuring adequate progression and improvement in learning and teaching is a necessity that must always be met. School, learning and social life are closely linked and dependent on each other (Dewey, 1899) and that is precisely why the role of teachers is becoming increasingly important and complex. They must be able to understand and answer the needs and requests of their students. To be able to do this, one must be a competent and well-trained professional.

Deep training, nowadays, is correlated by the concept of skills, both hard and soft skills.

It is no longer enough to only be a trained teacher, it is necessary to possess soft skills, in order to be able to provide students with a comprehensive and articulate education that is appropriate for their career, personal life, studies and work life (Matvienko & Popova, 2022).

This is why, for years, the University of Palermo has decided to focus its attention on the training of future school teachers.

Students of primary education degree courses, in fact, will be future teachers; they will be future people whose task will be to train pupils and students in turn. That is why it seems crucial to ensure that they are the recipients of adequate training. There is a strong need to provide them with a toolkit of relevant and suitable tools to be able to create an engaging and innovative learning and teaching environment in the future (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014).

Today's educational mission is to bring young students to understand how important it is to create, over time, a teaching-learning style that is meaningful for the learners.

To be able to do this, it is necessary to resort to didactic expedients that can make the training course more interesting.

Among the various existing didactic-pedagogical approaches, the University of Palermo, often, prefers the Service Learning one.

1.1 Service Learning: values and morals developer

It is becoming more and more widespread, and well known, fortunately, and today represents one of the most effective and surprising educational approaches within the education of the individual.

When placed within the training of future teachers, SL becomes a very valuable tool, as it provides a global learning experience.

As we said before, it is impossible to limit the idea of a complete education to knowledge alone, which is why among the many benefits and pros that SL brings, we mention above all the great capacity to develop moral values and soft skills.

A person, a teacher, a worker, a professional who possesses values and skills are already a step above the others.

It is necessary, therefore, that this concept of a global, moral and experiential education reaches the young students who will be future teachers (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Between the values that Service Learning manages to develop in people who take part in SL initiatives, we mention mutual help, solidarity, responsibility and citizenship.

Incrementing and implementing SL initiatives within higher education, especially within courses such as Primary Education Science, means to spread the idea that teachers must be able to create an educational environment that is innovative and attractive for students.

Allowing university students to take part in Service Learning activities, means giving them an unforgettable experience that they will carry with them for the rest of their life and career (Flinders, 2013).

2. The commitment of University of Palermo

The University of Palermo (UniPa) has always committed to offering its students a learning and teaching experience that can make the learning process more interesting and innovative, stimulating

and engaging. During the last years, in fact, UniPa implemented many Service Learning activities (La Marca & Longo, 2022).

It seems appropriate to mention the one that took place between years 2020 and 2022, the e-Service Learning project "Nobody left behind". Its aim was to design and implement educational paths for primary school students located in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Palermo.

The project involved 869 university students enrolled in the degree course of Primary School Science (303 from the third year; 293 from the fourth year; 273 from the fifth year) in designing a teaching course appropriate for helping and supporting primary school students in continuing their education and schooling path despite the arrival of the Covid-Sars19 pandemic.

University students organized themselves and designed their own educational activities, thanks to all the competencies and skills, soft and hard skills that they learned during all these university years. And this is the real purpose of Service Learning: it is not only something you do to help others, SL is useful, first of all, for your personal growth and for your experiential and values knowledge base; students manage to develop an educational path not only thanks to their knowledge.

A total of 60,000 hours of online teaching were delivered, thanks to which university students grew and school students did not drop out. This is a great achievement (La Marca & Falzone, 2023).

Another important Service learning initiative that was implemented during these years is the project "[P.R.] A.S.S.I. Apprendere Serve, Servire Insegna". This project was organized during the academic year 2022-2023; its focus was implementing educational and training activities intended for children living in the popular Ballarò-Albergheria neighborhood of the city of Palermo. This project involved 38 students from the first year of the Primary School Science degree course and helped young students in developing skills such as social and relational skills, citizenship and metacognitive attitudes (La Marca, Martino et al., 2023).

3. The importance of soft skills: for teachers, for students, for children

We are, now, in the 21st century and everything is constantly changing; the keywords are dynamism, flexibility and transversality. To do so, you have to be skilled, you have to know, but you also have to know how to do anything.

Being skilled is no longer an optional extra: it is a requirement.

It is interesting to see how, over the years, the skills required have changed. The World Economic Forum does annual research that studies the evolution and trends of the skills most in demand in the world of jobs. They produced a list of the 10 top skills required and needed to face 2025 (see figure 1). Among the skills listed, we can read analytical thinking, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and more. Equipping students with these skills as early as the university curriculum means taking care of their training in full.

It means, above all, getting ahead: you are training students who will be able to use these skills for themselves, but at the same time, you are training future teachers who will be able to pass them on to their future students.

Top 10 skills of 2025



Figure 1: Top 10 skills of 2025.

We strongly believe that it is necessary, for a positive change to occur, to work on and with the young students who will be future teachers. It means sowing seeds, giving rise to something that can evolve into a much better future. In this case, it is talking to students and teachers at the same time, because they are students now, but they will become teachers. It is like working in the present and the future at the same time. The musical training also helps to develop greater self-awareness and more balanced emotional management. In an increasingly competitive world, being able to recognize and regulate one's emotions is a fundamental quality for professional and personal success. Involvement in musical activities, which require commitment, patience and self-discipline, contributes significantly to the strengthening of self-efficacy, i.e. the perception of oneself as being able to cope successfully with difficulties. This is precisely why, during the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025, we organized a new activity with primary education students enrolled in the third year. The initiative was carried out during the hours of the music education course, with the aim of making students understand that practicing studies parallel to school, cultivating hobbies and being interested in other aspects, can benefit and improve their future path as teachers. Investing time in recreational, musical, social, artistic activities brings with it the very important development of soft skills that would not be able to be acquired just through school or university studies.

4. Music and soft skills: a student-led survey

As we said, among the activities that help develop soft skills, we mention the music practice; many scientific studies, in fact, confirm that music is an essential tool in improving and developing interpersonal, social and cognitive skills.

It has been demonstrated how the artistic expression of music, especially if practiced since childhood, facilitates the socialization process between individuals and makes the communication between humans more effective and immediate (Batt-Rawden & Stedje, 2020).

Thanks to practicing, playing or listening to music, you can develop your sensitivity, improve your memory, increase your creativity and concentration, and sharpen your active listening and communication skills (Diz-Otero et al., 2023).

The study of music not only enriches the educational experience but also plays a crucial role in the development of soft skills that are essential in every area of both professional and personal life. Although music is often seen as a subject for those who intend to follow a career in the arts, several

studies show that even those who do not become professional musicians benefit enormously from simply studying an instrument or practicing singing.

Music, in fact, is a universal form of communication that develops essential skills such as interpersonal communication, collaboration and creativity. Scientific studies confirm that music practice stimulates the brain in a unique way, improving cognitive and social skills of individuals, regardless of whether they pursue a musical career or not (Batt-Rawden & Stedje, 2020). Music learning also facilitates the development of emotional skills, such as stress management and resilience, qualities that are particularly important in a professional context, where the ability to adapt to new challenges is crucial.

One of the most remarkable aspects of studying music concerns the enhancement of active listening skills. Music requires an intensive focus and listening skills that transcend the simple listening: students who practice music are continuously stimulated to focus on others, to recognize shades and details, and to adapt their behavior in real time. These skills are crucial not only for professional growth, but also for the creation of more empathetic and cooperative interpersonal relationships.

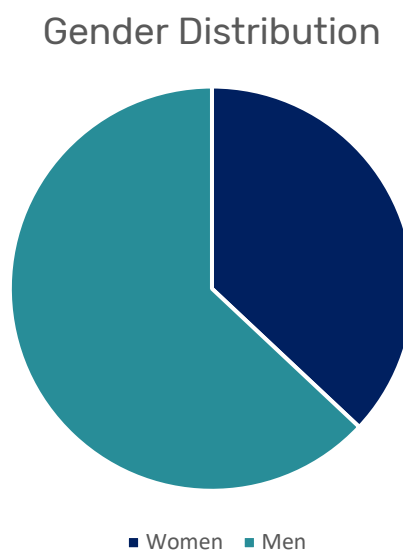
It is precisely from these theoretical roots that the initiative proposed to the students from the third year of Primary School Science was born. The main idea was to make students understand how much good practice and knowledge of music can do, even if it will not become one's job or main hobby; it is already enough to study an instrument for a while. This represents a great opportunity and a great gift you can give yourself.

4.1 Data collection and panel constitution

The students, based on their knowledge, identified two suitable candidates for their interviews; the candidates' participation was also on a voluntary basis. We gave students a task: they had to interview two working people (relatives, friends, parents, colleagues). Neither of them had to be a professional musician, but one of them had to have studied music during their education. The biggest aim was precisely to accredit the idea that those who have studied music during their education are now equipped with more useful skills in the world of work.

The task that we assigned was on a voluntary basis, we received 100 interviews. The students were not provided with pre-created questions, but we gave them instructions to ask the interviewees what are the soft skills that they activate most during their work. It was also necessary to ask the person who studied music if, in his/her opinion, his/her musical studies had helped in developing the skills that he/she considers fundamental in his/her job today.

Following a screening and analysis phase, we eliminated some interviews and kept 84 of them. We continued with the analysis of the profiles interviewed and classified them by gender and profession. The panel of respondents (N=84), consisted of 63% males and 37% females.



Graphic 1. Gender distribution of respondents: F=37%; M=63%.

The panel composition was very mixed: regarding the professions carried out by the respondents, encompassing many different professions, which is why we provide below a table with all the jobs and the number of frequencies (Figure 2). The richness of this wide range of professions results in a very cross-sectional data collection. It would perhaps have been limiting to interview candidates in the same profession, instead, thanks to the efforts of our students-future teachers, we are given a broad and heterogeneous overview of respondents.

JOBS	FREQUENCIES
Doctor	n.7
Italian teacher	n.1
Architect	n.5
Accountant	n.2
Violin teacher	n.1
Designer	n.2
Restaurateur	n.2
Computer scientist	n.3
Nurse	n.6
Trade unionist	n.2
Employee in PA	n.5
Lawyer	n.5
University professor of chemistry	n.1
Engineer	n.6
Primary school teacher	n.6
Plumber	n.2
Craftsman	n.4
Spanish teacher	n.1
Professor of science	n.1
Waiter/tress	n.2
Gymnastics teacher	n.1
Stationer	n.3
University student	n.3
Maths teacher	n.4
Support teacher	n.2
Cosmetician	n.2
Prevention technician	n.1
Religion teacher	n.1
Educator	n.1
Technology teacher	n.1
Music teacher	n.1
Teacher for adults	n.1
Secretary	n.5

Table 1: respondents' occupation.

To facilitate our work, we have organised the 84 occupations of our interviewees into 6 macro categories plus 1:

1. Healthcare field (nurses, doctors, etc.) = 13;
2. Education and training field (teachers, educators, etc.) = 23;
3. Construction field (designers, architects, etc.) = 9;
4. Law and accountancy field (lawyers, accountants, etc.) = 8;
5. Catering field (waiter, waitress, etc.) = 4;
6. Engineering and computer science field (engineers, etc.) = 9;
7. Other = 18.

5. Data analysis

All the questions and interviews were transcribed in their entirety by the students; thanks to this transcription, we were able to carry out a thematic analysis of each answer.

We decided to research and highlight the concepts and skills mentioned recurrently, with the aim of noting how often the same answers were repeated. The aim of the research was to highlight how amongst the respondents who had studied music, the importance of having acquired those soft skills was highlighted. To gain this information, we worked with the students and, working in groups, analysed each individual interview. We then highlighted and collected the recurring skills to get an overview of the most shared and widespread ideas. Each student then identified keywords within their interview and we made a shared word cloud (see Figure 2). This provided a visual and meaningful impact of the work done and the information gathered. We collected 207 different keywords, and they are all about the soft skills developed thanks to music.

207 responses



Figure 2: Soft skills developed through music.

It is interesting to analyse the keywords collected: they are very varied; they belong to rather disparate fields; there are some skills belonging to the artistic sphere, others more technical and still others social. Looking at the word cloud in question, where the size of the words is directly proportional to their frequency, those of concentration, teamwork and creativity appear in the foreground. In order to better organise the work, we therefore identified 24 thematic cores summarising the ideas collected and the skills that, according to the interviewees, are the most developed by music.

As a final step in the study of the results, we calculated the frequency and recurrence of each theme by making it a percentage figure, with the aim of calculating and identifying the skills most shared by the respondents.

Below are the top 10 skills most developed by the study of music according to our respondents (see table 2). On the podium, the winner is the skill of attention and concentration, followed by creativity and teamwork. All the skills that emerged during these interviews and this study are absolutely required and transferable to the profile of a good teacher. Our future students, in fact, must be able to be focused on their role, attentive to their class and the needs of their pupils. A very high level of creativity and imagination is also required, probably the most in-demand skill in the teaching profession.

The least shared skills, on the other hand, which come at the end of the list, are *responsibility* (1.19%), *multitasking* (1.19%), *self-confidence* (1.19%), *manual skills* (1.19%) and *logic* (1.19%). It is also interesting to note that dimensions such as the skill of manual dexterity, although it is the main and necessary aspect of practising music, do not appear among the most popular. This is probably because, for the respondents, it was more relevant and useful to implement skills such as *problem solving* (13.09%), *active listening* (15.47%) and *discipline* (17.85%), as they are more useful and required by their current jobs.

	SKILL	FREQUENCY (%)
1st	Concentration	26.19%
2nd	Creativity	20.23%
3rd	Team Working	19.04%
4th	Discipline	17.85%
5th	Stress Management	16.66%
6th	Active Listening	15.47%
7th	Patience	14.28%
8th	Communication	14.28%
9th	Problem Solving	13.09%
10th	Time management	13.09%

Table 3: List of the top 10 skills.

6. Conclusions and future perspectives

Thanks to the survey conducted, we were able to obtain further confirmation of the effectiveness and potential of music education. By exposing young people to the experience of musical practice, we are giving them an educational experience that will drastically mark, in a positive way, their future careers and lives.

Equipping our future teachers with all the required and necessary skills means preparing the ground for the future, for a better education. We are convinced, especially given the enthusiasm and amazement shown by our students, that it is necessary to spread the message that a good teacher is not just someone who teaches and explains well. A good teacher is the one who, first, is willing to put himself on the line, promoting long life learning and continuous and comprehensive training.

We sincerely hope that our students have understood the importance and importance of being ready for anything, ready to answer the needs of everyone and to the situations of work and personal life thanks to soft skills, which prove to be fundamental to be competent and prepared people and teachers.

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