



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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Theory into practice: exploring teacher perceptions about Early Intervention in the Italian school system¹

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Abstract

The article explores the topic of early intervention, focusing on the conditions that enable its effective implementation through the *Response to Intervention (RTI)* model within school contexts. As a part of a broader action-research project, the study aims to foster the professional development of curricular and support teachers in kindergarten and primary education. By using focus groups to explore and analyze participants' perceptions, the research identifies contextual and personal factors that facilitate or hinder early intervention on reading and writing skills. The findings highlight educators' training needs, and they also suggest preliminary guidelines for co-constructing an early educational intervention inspired by the *RTI* framework.

Keywords: early intervention; RTI; reading and writing acquisition; professional development; teachers' perceptions.

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1. Early intervention and the role of RTI: a proactive approach to reading and writing development

Learning to read and write begins early in children's development, long before kindergarten, laying down the foundation for long-term academic success. Over the past two decades, researchers have mapped out essential emergent abilities that gradually build up during the preschool years (Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Given the early onset of core literacy competencies, it becomes crucial to enhance them from birth to the onset of formal education (Fanari et al., 2005; Frith, 1985; Pontecorvo & Rossi, 2017; Snow et al., 1998; Zappaterra, 2017). Such support can be effectively woven into early intervention practices – strategies designed to shore up timely learning while preempting potential vulnerabilities (Morris, 2015).

Unlike the reactive “wait-to-fail” approach, early intervention adopts a preventive stance. Through multifaceted assessments and targeted progress monitoring, it seeks to back up literacy teaching and learning while addressing each student's specific need.

Among various early intervention models, *Response to Intervention (RTI)* has recently come into focus as both a tool for identifying educational needs and an intervention framework with strong potential to improve teachers' professional development and children's educational outcomes (Bullegas et al., 2024; Kovalski et al., 2013; Swanson et al., 2012).

RTI is often described as a multi-tiered intervention model. The core instructional program is evaluated to reinforce early literacy skills for all children (Tier 1) (Jimerson et al., 2015). Then, for children who struggle, Tier 2 offers targeted small-group intervention, paired with frequent progress monitoring. If challenges persist, Tier 3 involves a tailored individualized educational plan to address specific learning difficulties. If progress remains limited, educators may adjust strategies, redefine objectives, or provide additional support (Grosche & Volpe, 2013).

Moreover, the *RTI* model offers differentiated learning opportunities – whole-class, small-group or individualized instruction (Grosche & Volpe, 2013). Unlike “wait-to-fail” attitudes, this approach tackles the urgent need for effective teaching practices before turning to a specialist consultation. It calls for pedagogical actions that facilitate learning processes (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007).

Considering this, the *RTI* framework stands out as a powerful approach for improving teaching practices, offering clear guidelines for designing didactic support and determining when to ramp up its intensity.

2. Early Intervention in the Italian School System: challenges, practices, and the role of teacher training

Early intervention takes on particular significance within the regulatory guidelines of the Italian school system. Law 170 of October 2010 and its subsequent guidelines (2011, 2013) mandate that educational institutions implement early intervention programs. While diagnosis must be formulated by health facilities, Article 3 of the 2011 guidelines highlights the teacher's pivotal role in coordinating targeted reinforcement activities for pupils struggling with written language acquisition (Besio & Bianquin, 2017). Although there is a widespread consensus among researchers and educators on the value of early intervention, the reality within the Italian school system often throws up a contrasting picture (Maniscalco et al., 2016). Despite compliance with national guidelines, early intervention programs in Italy are often carried out by external experts rather than school staff. Such practices run the risk of chipping away at the teacher's professional agency, diminishing their accountability in addressing daily educational challenges (Segal, 2022; VanDerHeyden & Burns, 2010). At least in some cases, schools seem to have taken a step back in its pedagogical primary role, losing their central position in educational action.

This reflection aligns with recent data from the Ministry of Education (2022), which reveals an upward trend in diagnoses of specific learning disorders (SLD) over the past nine years, rising from 0.8% in 2004/2005 to 3.1% in 2018/2019 in primary schools. This trend brings to light the pressing need to explore innovative intervention strategies capable of addressing students' needs effectively (Corsi et al., 2022).

In this context, teacher training and shared educational responsibility are crucial in staving off late identification, which can adversely impact both the prognosis and development of the disorder (Giaconi et al., 2024). Understanding the methods and conditions required for implementing early intervention pathways is essential, as it allows for the identification of contextual and personal factors that can either empower or hold back teachers in carrying out such programs.

In this regard, this study explores the conditions for an early intervention by presenting the outcomes of a training program within an action research project, which involves both curricular and support teachers from kindergarten and primary school.

3. Teacher training and reflective practices: methodological and operational issues

The multifaced educational needs within the classroom, alongside the imperative to design accessible learning environments, bring to light the need for a highly developed teaching professionalism adept at navigating teaching-learning processes (Mura, 2019; Mura et al., 2019; Sibilio & Aiello, 2018). Such complexity calls not only for a solid professional identity but also for teachers to take on strategies that foster the full participation of all students while considering the characteristics of each one (Cottini, 2017; d’Alonzo, 2017; Pavone, 2014).

Therefore, reflective practice gains relevance in teacher education, serving as an essential tool for digging into the beliefs and values that drive teaching actions (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1983). This process helps to bring about deeper understanding in teaching and learning, acting as a cornerstone of professional development (Mura, 2019).

Within a collaborative action-research design, the present study marks the first step of a broader action-research project aimed at fostering teachers’ professional development through co-design practice focused on developing an early intervention program enhancing reading-writing skills (Creswell, 2012; Gravett, 2004).

Through a series of focus group sessions, nine kindergarten and primary school teachers from a Comprehensive Institute in Sardinia, were supported in highlighting barriers and facilitators to implement an early intervention program (Table 1).

| ID | Age | Gender | Professional role | Years on curricular role | Years on special education support role | School Level |
|-----------|------------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| Ins1 | 44 | Female | Support teacher | 5 | 7 | Kindergarten |
| Ins2 | 60 | Female | Curricular teacher | 27 | 11 | Primary School |
| Ins3 | 60 | Female | Curricular teacher | 27 | 11 | Primary School |
| Ins4 | 43 | Female | Curricular teacher | 0 | 6 | Primary School |
| Ins5 | 53 | Female | Support teacher | 0 | 10 | Primary School |
| Ins6 | 65 | Female | Curricular teacher | 19 | 0 | Kindergarten |
| Ins7 | 48 | Female | Curricular teacher | 1 | 10 | Kindergarten |
| Ins8 | 58 | Female | Curricular teacher | 33 | 0 | Kindergarten |
| Ins9 | 52 | Female | Curricular teacher | 14 | 0 | Kindergarten |

Table 1. Teacher’s characteristics.

The first phase of the project, carried out between February and March 2024, involved teachers in a process of discussion and reflection on learning to read and write, preventive instructional action and prerequisites. The focus group served as a conversational device where they could actively engage, shift from their initial perspectives, increase self-awareness and reflect on their experiences (Piñeda

et al., 2022). Sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. In total, 128 extracts were analysed. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was conducted using MAXQDA software (v. 22.2.0) (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The analysis was developed on three distinct levels: 1) open coding of the transcripts; 2) organization of the identified codes into related areas; and 3) development of analytical themes. The themes were derived (Cameron et al., 2016) inductively from the data, providing a comprehensive portrayal of the participants' perspectives (Saldana, 2013). Coding was performed by two raters, and an inter-rater agreement index was calculated to ensure coding reliability. In cases of disagreement, discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

4. Narrating the professional experience: teachers' perspectives

As depicted in Figure 1, the shared reflections led to two distinct polarities: one centered on individual factors related to the teacher's professional profile, and the other on contextual elements linked to the educational network. These factors may act as either barriers or facilitators in the successful implementation of an early literacy program.

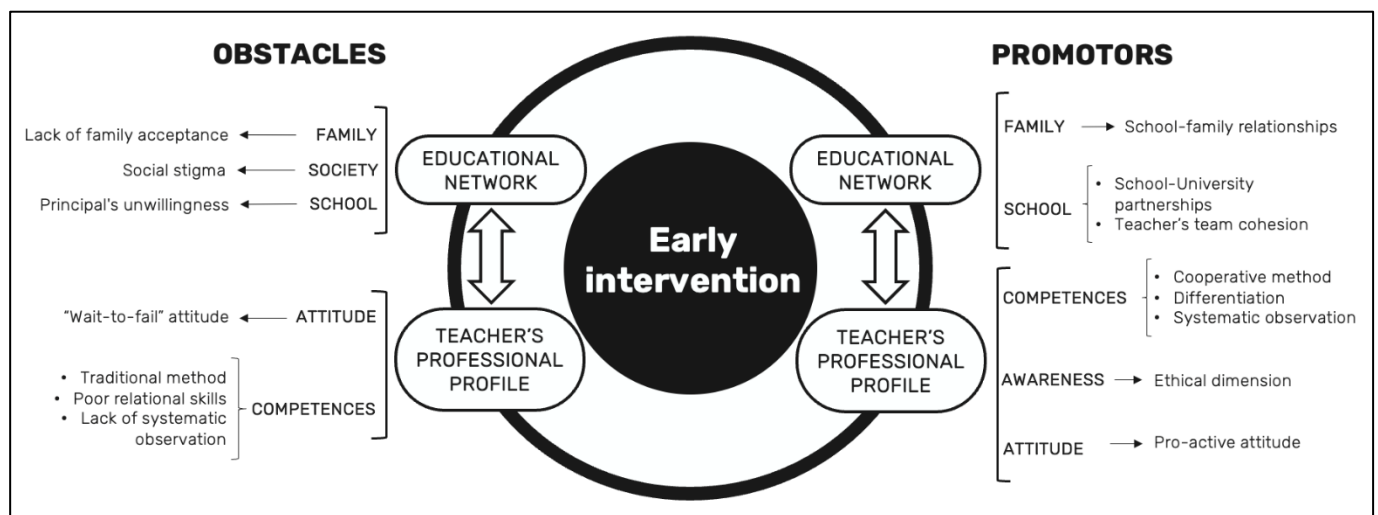


Figure 1. Representation of themes, sub-themes and codes.

4.1 A fragile educational network: obstacles and facilitators for early educational intervention

During the meetings, special attention was given to the impact social and family contexts play in teachers' educational choices. Given the shared narratives, Figure 2 shows the distribution of the main obstacles within the educational network.

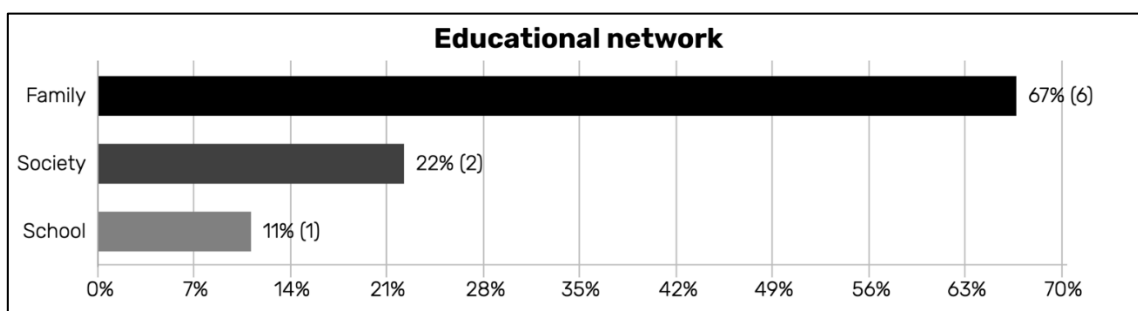


Figure 2. Obstacles associated with the educational network: the percentage reported is about the number of sentences in which the obstacles are cited.

In the accounts provided by participants, parental apprehension about the presence of an educational support seems to be a significant barrier to early intervention:

«The fact of having a support teacher is something families may wish to keep hidden [...]» (Ins7).

This excerpt shows that social stigma can influence educational dynamics, often leading to a lack of trust and unwillingness to listen to teachers:

«The family does not come to terms with it easily: in many cases it requires time» (Ins4).

Intra-school dynamics may also pose obstacles to the implementation of early intervention. Some teachers suggest that these challenges can be influenced by the approach of the school principal:

«I've worked in schools where communication is completely absent. The principal doesn't allow certain issue to be discussed [...]. Later, a parent, exercising his right, criticized the lack of intervention for his daughter by the time she entered primary school» (Ins1).

Similarly, relationships with colleagues can be tough, especially due to the lack of shared values and perspectives:

«We generally file reports when we observe difficulties. However, some teachers avoid doing so, either due to unwillingness or lack of skills» (Ins4).

Despite these challenges, as illustrated in Figure 3, teachers recognize that involvement in research projects, even when not specifically focused on early interventions, offers a valuable pathway for professional development:

«We are currently in the fifth year of our teaching experimentation project and throughout these years, we have pursued personal growth thanks to the unwavering support of a research group who have listened to us from the beginning» (Ins3).

In addition to the benefits of research involvement, constructive collaboration with colleagues emerges as a crucial contextual factor:

«We work as a team, coordinating on certain intervention projects – it's not about individual choice, practice must be agreed upon and shared» (Ins3).

Moreover, while the school-family relationship can be marked by episodes of uncertainty, participants underscore the importance of parental engagement in educational processes:

«We talk to parents regularly, reaching out whenever we notice any issues. Communication with them is essential» (Ins3).

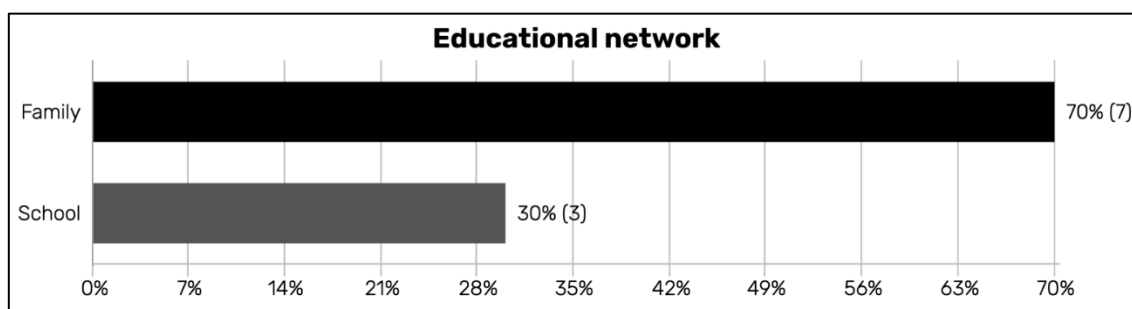


Figure 3. Promotors associated with the educational network: the percentage reported is about the number of sentences in which the promotors are cited.

In sum, the interplay between research participation, teamwork, and strong school-family partnerships creates a framework for improving teaching and learning. However, the fragility of these relationships poses a significant challenge to fostering an educational culture focused on early intervention.

4.2 Teacher practice: aspects of uncertainty and awareness for proactive teaching

Thematic analysis has led to the identification of key personal factors that can impact on teaching practices (Figure 4).

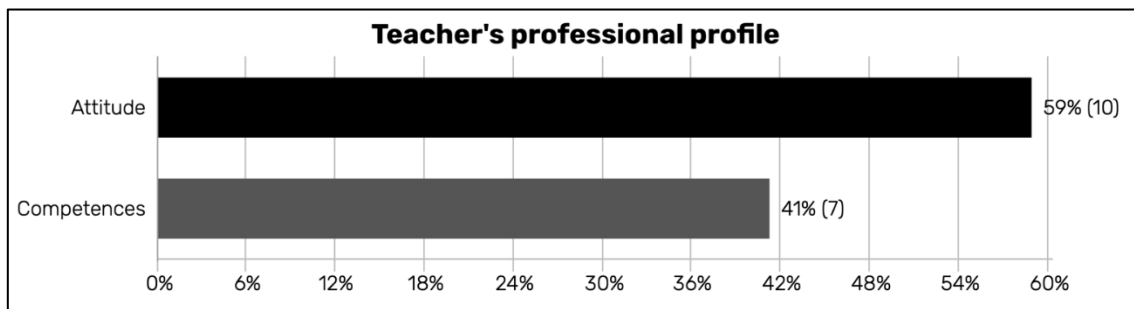


Figure 4. Obstacles associated with teacher's professional profile.

Among the most critical dimensions, preschool teachers highlighted a prevalent "wait-and-see" attitude, which can undermine professional responsibility:

«I don't agree with teachers who wait until the start of first grade [...]. I would immediately activate an intervention at that moment» (Ins2).

At the same time, participants view the inability to move away from transmissive learning perspectives as another obstacle:

«Some teachers would like the same approach to be applied to all children» (Ins2).

However, certain facilitators were identified as well. Participants converged on the concept of "professional identity", which they viewed as a complex set of competences, values and attitudes that define the teacher's role.

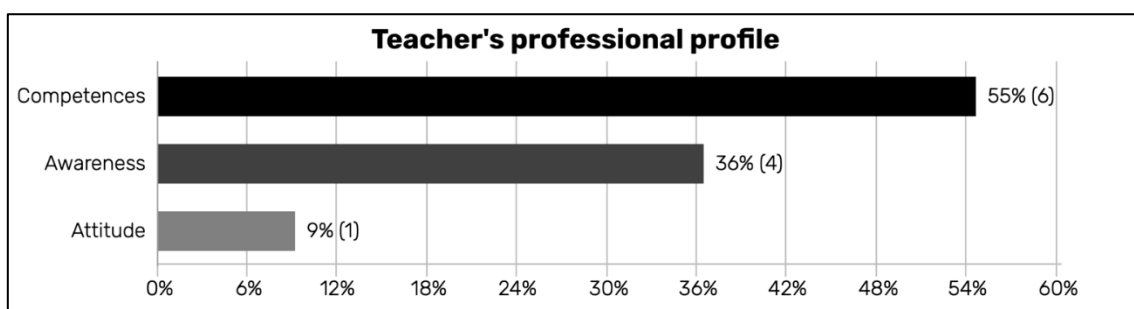


Figure 5. Promotors associated with teacher's professional profile.

As shown in Figure 5, the analysis revealed the importance of teacher competences. Relational skills, for instance, can foster a positive classroom environment and bolster student learning:

«Every day in the classroom various dynamics unfold. You observe, encourage, and sometimes reprimand. Without this vigilance, you would miss the daily growth of the group» (Ins2).

Teachers also emphasized methodological and operational capabilities, which enable them to recognize educational intent as the driving force behind early intervention:

«You must engage in thoughtful consideration of the class; you cannot assume that a single approach will be effective for everyone. [...] When you notice that some activities start to feel burdensome for certain students while others are managing well, it's important to diversify your approach [...] (Ins2).

Equally significant are communication skills, essential not only for supporting parents but also for fostering effective collaboration among colleagues:

«One of the key aspects is the importance of seeing things from the parent's perspective, fostering deep empathy and recognizing that we are engaging with the people who love that child most» (Ins3).

This expertise is reinforced by methodological practices, such as systematic observation:

«Observations are needed by the teacher to build the pathway in relation to that child» (Ins3).

Lastly, the deontological dimension holds significant relevance for teachers:

«[...] I adhere to an ethical code; my responsibility is to observe, report, and intervene [...]. Not intervening constitutes a violation of the rights of both the child and the parent» (Ins1).

These aspects suggest a complex system of personal and interpersonal factors that can either hinder or facilitate early intervention practices. They create an integrative context that encourages reflection and action-research, helping teachers develop and implement intentional, proactive strategies for early intervention.

5. Concluding remarks

The training course provided an opportunity for an in-depth reflection on essential dimensions critical to fostering early intervention processes. Within this collaborative setting, teachers identified key factors shaping their daily teaching practices and proactively sought resources and solutions to address challenges. Peer dialogue facilitated a meaningful discussion on teacher agency and the recognition of ethical values. These elements are relevant from a didactic perspective, achieving full expression in social-relational and communicative skills: the ability to interact with families, address parents' concerns, foster collaborative relationships with colleagues, engaging students, thus supporting any potential fragility.

Additionally, the opportunity to share professional experiences in a group setting allowed teachers to reflect on their specific perspectives and pinpoint their specific needs, particularly in terms of professional development and ongoing training.

The outcomes presented here mark only the beginning of a more extensive process aimed at establishing a common space for collaborative shared inquiry. In this space, teachers and researchers can work together to identify effective solutions and create optimal conditions for implementing early intervention programs.

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