



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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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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S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy

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Helping to learn. What are good practices of educational intervention?

Structure and preliminary results of a participatory research study

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Abstract

The impact of Covid-19 has produced a renewed debate on the quality of teaching and invited us to reconsider the strategic role of the teaching profession in providing quality education. Educational interventions that support the development of literacy skills represent a key direction of intervention, which also needs to be explored on the basis of a deeper understanding of educational processes in context. In relation to these issues, the contribution aims to present the framework and initial results of a participatory research project. The study re-proposes the usefulness and the problem of how to study teaching practices in order to obtain useful knowledge for the improvement of teaching processes.

Keywords: didactic mediation; analysis of teaching practices; professionalisation of teachers; participatory research; quality of teaching.

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¹ Daniela Maccario is responsible for and author of the Mediations Project: conception and problematisation, theoretical-methodological framework; identification of the sampling criteria and implementation; elaboration of the original survey instruments; data processing; she is the author of paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4: 4.1, 5. Annamaria Garibaldi is research fellow in the Project (funding Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences University of Turin; CRC Foundation co-financing 2023-2024; 2024-2025); she collaborates in the implementation of the activities and is responsible for paragraph 4.2.

1. Problem and research aim

The didactic emergency that occurred during the pandemic period drew attention to teaching as a professional activity characterised by its own competences and knowledge, specifically pertaining to what can be done to support students' learning processes and personal growth (Maccario, & Garibaldi, 2023). The issue concerning the quality of teaching action is also proposed in relation to the orientations of training policies with respect to the competence profiles expected at the end of the educational cycles and for the exercise of citizenship and social insertion (Council of the Europe 2018; 2023), as well as following the dissemination of the results of national and international surveys on school learning (INVALSI, 2022; Pisa, 2018, 2022) and the competences of the adult population (OECD, 2024). In the face of social expectations, phenomena and socio-educational issues that require to be interpreted and addressed by the professionals in the field, educational research is called upon to take action in order to produce scientific knowledge on teaching-learning processes and their possibilities for innovation. Starting from this problematic framework, we sketch the outlines and some initial results regarding the start-up of a research project promoted at the University of Turin - Progetto Mediazioni© - in order to reconstruct 'good' teaching practices for the development of literacy skills of pupils from pre-school to the first two years of secondary school, to be analysed in order to extract, with the participation of the teachers, elements for the definition of operational criteria capable of responding, through comparison with the theoretical knowledge available, ever better to the training needs and requirements in school contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

The object of investigation identified is the teaching action with reference to how the teacher teaches in order to promote literacy skills in students. Teaching action is considered in terms of didactic mediation, in a processual and interactive key. Reference is made to a conception of knowledge and learning of a fundamentally Piagetian and Brunerian constructionist matrix (Damiano, 2016), with Vygotskyian references (Lenoir, 2017), according to which the indispensable condition for the learning process to take place is the possibility given to the subject to intentionally intervene in the situations he/she experiences. This dynamic is developed at school through the mediation of teachers, who assume a role of promoting learning when, by activating appropriate forms of communicative exchange with pupils, they offer them the opportunity to interact with the didactic situation -in mental and/or practical terms- and to reflect on the experience they live, carrying out a process of structuring and restructuring of their knowledge. In the context of this study, we adopt an approach aimed at trying to "make evident" some salient aspects of the phenomenology of the processes of instructional mediation enacted by teachers with the intention of promoting appropriate skills with respect to language mastery in relation to teaching in different subject areas, thus intercepting aspects of the "de facto curriculum" (Perrenoud, 1993). These are processes that are little known even by the teachers themselves, at least in an explicit and formalised key, the analysis of which can fuel reflection on how to improve teaching in order to promote consistently effective forms of learning. The working hypothesis underlying the project is that of trying to explore teaching-learning processes that can be traced back to the "teacher effect" (Bru, 2021), not with respect to presumed personal characteristics - on which it is difficult to intervene - or effectiveness "traits" considered in a stable and decontextualised form, but according to an interactive conception, which requires experimenting with forms of detecting the ways in which the "teacher teaches", from the point of view of implementing a modulated set of cognitive, material, relational and temporal conditions with which the learners are confronted, in order to help them learn through the appropriation of disciplinary knowledge. It is a matter of trying to identify the professional gestures that arise from the activation of decision-making levers that can be considered typical and inherent to teaching activity, "multi-agenda" (Boucheton, Soulé, 2009) insofar as they only partially correspond to predefined and predictable didactic settings, rather significantly attributable to unforeseen events, psychological

loads, conditioning, simultaneous and often contradictory demands in classroom management, the subjectivity of pupils and the forms of resistance they normally express.

3. Method

The study was developed according to a methodological pathway with "structural" connotations (Maccario, 2021; 2022), in relation to a framework based on a critical reconnaissance of the literature (Maccario, 2023), screened with the recipients of the research as to its significance in intercepting the experience and decision-making underlying the conduct of teaching interventions aimed at addressing recurring problems in teaching for the development of literacy skills. A specific research problem was identified as the construction of a reasoned national sample of teachers "experienced" in teaching language communication in various subject areas, from kindergarten to the first two years of secondary school (corresponding to compulsory education), who could be motivated with respect to the objectives of the research and the role proposed to them. The involvement of participants in the survey took place thanks to the activation of professional communities involved through a specific "research alliance pact"². A key challenge was the construction of original data collection tools, including a semi-structured questionnaire – Questionario Mediazionis@ -. This is a self-completed questionnaire, delivered in a computerized manner on a Limesurvey university platform, which, partly through dedicated technical support, has been enhanced for potentially large-scale detection of narrative reconstructions of teaching interventions in response to specific problems encountered in professional practice (supported by documentary material and in-depth interviews). The construction of the research team, the process of pre-validation of the questionnaire from the point of view of its coherence and validity with respect to the purposes of the survey flowed into the development of a participatory research-training process started in 2022, with the conclusion of the first phase, corresponding to the administration of the questionnaire, in March 2024.

4. Some initial results

4.1. Traces of good teaching practice to help learning

The survey involved 85 teachers working in Lombardy and Piedmont who, starting from the invitation within the professional communities adhering to the research, self-selected themselves as "experts" for having developed intervention strategies in the classroom that they recognised as effective in dealing with the problems intercepted by the survey. This is a sample of teachers who are almost totally engaged in teaching in the language field, 60% of whom have more than twenty years of service; 40%, 24%, 21%, 15% of whom are primary, secondary and pre-school teachers. Although the composition of the group of respondents denotes a sample with specific characteristics, an initial exploration of the data base obtained suggests the possibility of constructing significant and adequately reliable knowledge to deepen the object of study and returns forms of feedback on the informative potential of the survey device adopted. An initial thematic analysis carried out on the teaching situations reported as problematic (Maella, 2022) and taken care of with targeted interventions, attests to the widespread presence of reading criteria that well intercept the "medial heart" of didactics, with an articulation of directions of problematisation that makes one note, by way of example, the need, in order to "teach well", to understand the causes of the linguistic-communicative difficulties that students manifest; to know better the learning needs and potentialities of the pupils; to realise an adequate didactic differentiation in the classroom; to succeed in engaging the pupils; to support the connection between school language learning and out-of-school experience; to work on the acquisition of an adequate lexical repertoire to understand and be understood; to find solutions to make pupils acquire linguistic awareness and competence through

² The professional associations of teachers operating at a national level have formalised a cooperation pact within the Project - Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences University of Turin: AIMC (Piedmont section: Turin, Asti; Lombardy: Milan-Monza); Ecogeses Cooperative; UCIIIM (Piedmont and Lombardy); OPPI.

the study of grammar. The reduced recurrence of problems read in a tendentially extrinsic key with respect to the teachers' professional responsibility (problems considered to be more or less permanently borne by the students, such as lack of interest, difficulty in concentrating, lack of recognition of the role required by the school, learning difficulties, deficiencies relating to the students' cultural and experiential heritage) or according to a partial vision (for example, where the need to devise generic innovative teaching activities is perceived above all) seems significant.

4.2 The questionnaire: feedback on the sustainability and effectiveness

After the questionnaire instrument was put online, there followed a "test" phase through a selected sample that allowed not only to improve the wording of some items, but also to verify the proper functioning of the system and, for the purpose of scientific reliability, to test the stability of the entire survey corpus. Each participant, associated with a specific identifier generated through an "access code" to the survey, received by e-mail the link to access the compilation with the "instruction vademecum" attached. All participants had the opportunity to write to the dedicated e-mail address ('progetto.mediazioni@unito.it') to report any problems encountered during the compilation phase, also receiving technical support and alternative solutions. The narrative reconstruction questionnaire administered through the university's Limesurvey platform, according to the respondents, essentially provided reassurance that the research could be traced back to the relevant university institution and that the scientificity and confidentiality of personal data were guaranteed; the graphical iteration and intuitiveness of the online environment were valued as facilitating factors in writing.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections: the first concerns the biographical data of the respondents; the second contains personal professional and educational experiences; and the last is the reconstruction of a classroom teaching intervention in relation to a particular area of teaching-professional problems and represents the "heart" of the questionnaire. An acquired fact regarding the scientific and educational valence of the Project, concerns the recognition of the questionnaire as a tool to support the reflective reconstruction of practices in a form oriented by relevant theoretical keys in the scientific literature.

We report some specific aspects. As a first element, the "paradigm of reflexivity" emerges widely: , the reflective posture with the explication of non-overlapping meanings:

«The setting of the questions allows you to look at the educational path with greater depth of gaze and to observe the gaps that accompany us» (one of the respondents to the survey).

The questionnaire is configured as: a tool that helps to stop and read within oneself, a pause to bring out teaching and educational practices unconsciously enacted, a return to reflect at the metacognitive level, a retrospective look at one's teaching. The questionnaire is considered a useful tool for in-depth and metacognitive investigation of one's professional identity. Other strategic elements that emerged are: awareness of the teacher's mediating role in helping students learn; recognition of the importance of documentation of teaching pathways and the need to implement it for the reconstruction and enhancement of classroom practices; and finally, the importance of understanding the "impact" that one's teaching has on all students.

5. Conclusion

An initial analysis seems to confirm the consistency of the survey device adopted with respect to the objectives of the research and as a tool to support the reflective reconstruction of practices in a form oriented by the relevant theoretical keys in the literature. The reconstruction of classroom interventions, in dialogue with frames of reference that refer to certain fundamental "structures" peculiar to teaching action, seems to favor the emergence of processes recognized by professional actors as indicative of the problems and operational strategies of a didactics oriented to the acquisition of linguistic-communicative skills. On the epistemological level, the device seems to respond to the need to build a knowledge to support the exercise of the teaching profession based on a double validation, theoretical-scientific and practical, based, therefore, on the interrogation and

dialogue of a multiplicity of different sources. In terms of scientific investigation, the launch of the project highlights the importance for researchers of a commitment to investigation and theoretical reconnaissance, oriented towards outlining frameworks that are more consistent with the complexity of the object of investigation, represented by the transformative interaction between the formalised structures of knowledge proper to scientific-disciplinary knowledge and the growing cognitive structures of students, through a continuous dialogue, intentionally prepared and facilitated by teachers, in the exercise of their professional activity of didactic mediation. On the methodological front, the need to collect 'embodied' and contextualised data, susceptible, however, to forms of re-appropriation even in a trans-contextual key, also requires a particular commitment to the definition of valid and reliable tools and approaches for data collection and processing, even original ones, when not directly borrowed from other scientific fields. We can also observe that while the challenge of participatory research seems to be a scientific path, as well as an educational one, not to be underestimated or, even, according to the posture of the writer, to be favoured, it remains realistically to be analysed through systematic experiences and project realisations the junction of sustainability for the actors themselves, within a framework of clarity with respect to professional roles and institutional frameworks.

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