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A glimpse of secondary school: Competences and performance from a sample of teachers and students in Italy

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Introduction

This research reports on teacher competencies and performance as expressed by an Italian sample group in a comparative study that aimed to investigate the relationship between demand and offer of the competences of teaching staff in selected secondary schools in five countries. For demand we mean the expectations of students' competences; for offer we mean the effective competences that teachers are using in school. The research points out the multiple modes of individual perception and social standing of the teachers and students in the secondary school context. Who and what is a teacher according to his/her competences, in Cyprus, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Romania? What are the experiences of students concerning their teachers' mission and competences? The study was made using the same questionnaire in each country, adapting it to the school context, to the teachers' and the students' understanding. Further teachers and students were invited to jointly discuss the results of our investigation for improving four levels of knowledge: 1) the status of teachers in school as a reflection of what society thinks about them; 2) the experience and perception of students, referring to how they consider their teachers' competences and mission; 3) what can be introduced into our secondary schools in order to increase mutual, positive interaction between teachers and students; 4) awareness of the fact that positive interaction in school is a form of education to active citizenship.

Comparative research in Europe

This research is in continuity with the previous comparative surveys on the identity of teachers and ethics (Chistolini, 2009). The five-country team developed a comparative research in Europe concerning the question of competences in secondary schools from the points of views of the offer of teachers and demand of students. Competences play a crucial role in school life. Teachers are required to be competent in teaching and students are expected to be able to respond properly to pass from grade to grade. Teachers and students face the challenge of the knowledge society in terms of designing new contexts of citizenship. The dilemma the research poses is the ability of theories of competences to become practice in educating towards a new European citizenship.

Contexts, sample groups and methodological approaches

The contexts of the survey were secondary schools, in which we selected two sample groups: one consisting of students from grades I - III - V (age 14- 16- 18) and one of teachers from the same classes as the students interviewed. The instruments of investigation were two questionnaires. One with 27 questions addressed to students and one with 50 questions addressed to teachers. The questionnaires were produced in Italian

and for the comparative study were then translated into the languages of the participating countries: German, Greek, Portuguese and Romanian. In each country unit there was an expert in the Italian language to assure the correct meaning and translation of the questionnaires. Each country unit of research presented its own composition of the sample groups, selected in accordance with the school timetable and accessibility.

The discussion about competences in secondary school starts from the point of view of teachers and students: self esteem and evaluation of teachers and students' perception of the professional role of teachers.

Main theories discussed and principal points

The cultural debate about the professional status of teachers reveals fundamental questions concerning the nature of professional status within the system of education, which is influenced by factors such as social expectations, cultures of working with parents, family education, the role of other agencies etc. Literature points out: the increasing autonomy of schools; the ability to diagnose the educational needs of the students; the ability to give reasons for the learning process; organisational dimension; divulgation of knowledge; experience and reflexivity; research attitude; communicative ability; professional deontology as regards freedom and responsibility of teaching. What appears is a professional attitude, leaning more towards proposal and creative innovation than the executive role of teachers (Margiotta, 2006). Within the school context, one also notes the same phenomenology (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Concerning the gap between competences and performance (Chomsky, 2006), one can determine the theoretical differences in the field dealing with the assessment of targets (Pellerey, 2004) and practice of teaching (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970).

General quantitative aspects of the Italian sample group

Survey field

The comments hereafter refer to the results obtained from questionnaires used in the Region of Lazio, given out to a sample group of secondary schools in the city of Rome. The two questionnaires, one for students and the other for teachers, were prepared previously for a national research and entitled *Domanda ed offerta di competenza nella professione docente insegnanti tra realtà, rappresentazioni e aspettative istituzionali nelle regioni Lazio, Veneto, Lombardia, Campania* (Demand and supply of competences in the teaching profession, teachers midst institutional realities, representations and expectations in the regions of Lazio, Veneto, Lombardy and Campania). The research availed itself of national co-financing, known as Prin 2007-2009. With reference to the international research, it was suggested to the group of colleagues from the CiCe Network, to be given in secondary schools on Cyprus and in Germany, Portugal and Romania. Here, we are presenting the results relative to Italy.

Aim of the questionnaires

The two questionnaires were given to the students and their teachers simultaneously. In fact, in order to make a cross-comparison of the data given by the students with that given by their teachers and evaluate the competence perceived by the students and the self-perception of their teachers, it was necessary for both parties of the research to be present in the classroom at the same time. While the students answered in their questionnaires, the teachers did the same with their questionnaires. The time for completing the two questionnaires was uniform.

Definition of the sample groups

The sample schools were by making use of the statistical surveys supplied by the Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale di Roma (Provincial Education Office of Rome) during the month of April 2009. The information database is the S.I.M.P.I. (Sistema Informativo del Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca – Information System of the Ministry of Education of the University and Research) and concerns the school register and information acquired for the purpose of the definite organisational procedure for the school year 2007-2008. The situation is the one known to the S.I.M.P.I. on 29 November 2007 when the school population in the city of Rome numbered over 60.000 students. A *clustering* of the schools was carried out through setting up clusters of schools divided into Secondary Schools (A), Technical schools (B) and Professional schools (C). Each *cluster* (A,B,C) was weighed up with the student population by identifying their percentage uniformity. Then, based on statistical comparisons with other research, a percentage of the sample to be interviewed was established that could guarantee extension and generalisation of the data. The number of students to be interviewed from each cluster and in each school class was established in proportion to the sample population.

Identification of the educational institutions by school class was performed by means of random criteria. Teachers from the classes that completed the questionnaire were interviewed in order to verify and compare the perceptions of the competence of teachers and the competence of students. The sample group used to treat the results was set up in a well thought out manner in order to guarantee local representativeness.

Quantitative description

In State-run secondary education in Rome, during the school year 2007-2008, a total of 71.427 students in 3.166 first, third and fifth-year classes were registered, i.e. 22.56 students per class. Out of these, 12 schools were chosen from various study directions. A sample group of 6.249 students from 264 first, third and fifth-year classes was picked, equal to 8,7% of the overall student population. Of these students, 3.572 were interviewed, or 57,2%, i.e. over half of the sample group, and 219 teachers, present in the classrooms while the student were doing the questionnaire.

Comment on the teachers' questionnaire

Socio-demographic and cultural characteristics of the Italian sample group

The sample group of 219 teachers was selected in the 12 schools. In the questionnaire, 9 out of the 50 questions were posed in order to define the social, demographic and cultural structure of the sample group. The school most represented in the survey was the Professional School (32,4%) and the least represented was the Teachers' Training college with 18,3% of the participants. Teachers were rather well distributed across the three years of school surveyed, with a slight majority from the first year and slight minority from the fifth year due to the time-consuming task of preparing the final school-leaving examination.

Most of the teachers were women (69,0%), in the age bracket 34-45; for the most part (52,5%), they had been teaching humanistic-literary subjects, some for over 20 years (48,9% of the cases).

In the vast majority of the cases, teachers had graduate's degrees (74,4%) but only 1,1% held doctorates; 30,6% had attended a refresher course and/or specialisation course for professional teacher's training. Only 9,9% held the qualification of SSIS (Specialisation School for Secondary School Teaching) and 14,2% had attained a teaching qualification. On the whole, less than 20% did not declare any further educational qualification and the remaining 80% had followed up with post-degree preparation.

Qualitative aspects of the profession

Through 39 structured and closed sentences and 2 open questions, an endeavour was made to reveal the representation of the teachers in their professional activity, taking three types into account, developed afterwards to enable a layered comment on the results obtained. Each level has seven categories of analysis.

First level: descriptive

- a) the psycho-educational impact on the students 3- 8 (question's number)
- b) the pedagogic-didactic dimension of teaching 2-7-10
- c) the socio-cultural factor of education 4
- d) the intellectual investment 5
- e) the interpersonal, human experience 6
- f) relationships with *external persons*, referring to family and people outside the school 1-9
- g) relationships with *persons inside* the school, referring to colleagues, the headmaster 20-26-32

Second level: interpretative

- a) motivation 11
- b) educational strategies 13-14-16
- c) development 12
- d) responsibility 18-28
- e) ethics 34
- f) democratic principles 38
- g) internal and external organisation 17-22

Third level: evaluative

- a) communication and interaction 15-21-29

- b) relations 23-25-27
- c) valuation techniques 19-30
- d) anthropology 24
- e) documentation 31-33-39
- f) respect, impartiality 35-37
- g) adjustment 36

Comparison of the three levels, descriptive, interpretative and evaluative, with the relative maximum and minimum reply percentages, allows for an overall reading of the data collected.

The *descriptive* point of view revealed the choice of the proposition ‘When the student expresses an experience, I manage to accept it without judging it’ (91,7%) and the proposition ‘I involve the students in defining the rules and undertake to have them respected (90,8%); this is a sign that the interpersonal human experience is slightly higher than the consideration of the social-cultural factor of education. Relationships with *external persons* are cut off, in the point in question, family (85,4%), other persons outside the school (54,7%).

The second, *interpretative* level revealed the choice of proposition: ‘When I introduce new terms, I explain them carefully’ (93,1%), while, from the opposite side, we find: ‘I generally use various teaching methods (lessons, workgroups, simulation, production of materials, projects, etc.) related to the contexts and situations’ (60,2%) as well as the comment: ‘I manage to mobilise the best resources and aptitudes of the students, by promoting the development of their autonomy’ (68,5%), not very different from the collegiate point of view: ‘I usually collaborate with colleagues in an *effective collegial spirit*’ (68,9%).

The third, *evaluative* level highlights a broad preference for the cultural anthropological choice, expressed by the proposition: ‘I always try to put the persons I’m speaking with at ease’ (90,8%), on an equal par with the choice of proposition of respect and impartiality: ‘I take the utmost care in treating people equally and valorising each person’s specificity’ (90,8%). Less chosen was the sentence concerning collaboration, expressed as: ‘I promote collaborative attitudes and behaviour by using group dynamics’ (64,8%).

In summary, what emerges is a scenario of teachers characterised by experiential appreciation, didactic valorisation, anthropological sensitivity and a search for fairness, confirmed by reading the open questions, through which teachers were asked to indicate, where their professionalism is better expressed and where an improvement should be made.

Places for expressing professionalism

Daily rapport with the students to be able to build up a climate of serenity, trust and mutual respect. They are ready for further explanations and in-depth study of the subjects (02.5.43.41 *numbers corresponding to School 02 Class 5 Questionnaire 43 Question 41*).

Definitely in teaching, to which I give maximum care and attention, especially in supplying students with the right tools for learning. A lot of care is also dedicated to making an effort to understand the capacities and problems of each student (07.1.116.41).

Since teaching is a free choice, school is an ideal environment, but today the figure of a teacher has been degraded; we do not feel sufficiently appreciated, despite our heavy daily workload (05.1.75.41).

I think I do my job well and with due professionalism, even if the job is rather demanding and often not given much relevance (07.5.137.41).

Aspects for improving professionalism

More involvement from the students who seem increasingly passive (01.5.17.42).

I would like to have more space for preparing interdisciplinary activities with my colleagues and improving the teaching plan, so that the students become more responsible for their learning path (04.3.65.42).

One should always improve the capacity to listen and know their means of expression, using models that inspire them (08.3.155.42).

It is necessary to become more objective in evaluations and leave aside any effects that might implicate fairness of judgement (02.5.43.42).

Special attention to the idea of citizenship and civil coexistence is expressed by the teachers who give import to educating towards social coexistence, respect for regulations, active participation of the students as constituent factors in the professionalism expressed 'In rendering the students favourable to the situation of social coexistence' (07.1.109.41); 'in respect for regulations' (07.1.111.41), and to be expressed 'In rendering various subjects more up to date from the students' point of view, to get them more interested and induce them to actively participate' (04.1.62.42).

Role expectations

Considering that over 59% of the teachers, who replied to the questionnaire, stated their feeling fulfilled by their profession, having chosen teaching through a "free, enthusiastic" decision and being so convinced of the positiveness of this occupation as to be hypothetically willing to repeat it, one understands that the moments of solitude, bureaucratic suffocation, perception of inadequacy regarding their role are only passing clouds, which the deep conviction in the significant professional choice for themselves and society is able to dispel, handing back a highly motivated and decisively committed teaching staff to the school.

Remarks about the questionnaire taken by the students

Social, personal and cultural characteristics of the sample group

The sample group of 3.572 students from Rome schools was composed of 42,6% from secondary schools and 57,4% from professional schools. The specific breakdown of the students was 40,5% from the first year (aged 14), 33,5% from the third year (aged 16) and 26,0% from the fifth year (aged 18). The total of females and males was 50,7% and 49,3%, respectively, 91,7% of which were Italian nationals.

The 27 closed questions below allowed for describing the sample group according to the following types related to the competences the students attribute to their teachers.

Social interaction competences

- allow for dialogue, questions 3 (question's number)
- maintain discipline in the classroom, 9
- feeling of restlessness in the classroom, 17
- put themselves in the students' shoes, 19
- involve families, 21

Ethical competences

- do not always respect the students, 1
- admit to their own mistakes, 4
- respect their commitments, 5
- do not change, 6
- allocate values, 7

Disciplinary competences

- explain, 8
- do not motivate, 16
- know the material, 22
- interrelate the topics, 23
- outside connections, 24

Methodological competences

- have no study method, 10
- use suitable tools, 12
- few indications, 15
- discuss things suitably, 18
- very little comparison, 20
- do not adapt the contents to the class and students, 25
- alternate methods, 26
- support materials, 27

Assessment competences

- favour some students, 2
- subjective evaluation, 11
- evaluate without giving criteria, 13
- comment on the evaluations, 14

Top-down social interaction

According to most of the students surveyed (q. 3: 72,5%), teachers adopt an open attitude, also towards classroom discussions, do not impose their own point of view during these discussions and allow the students to express their own views.

This fact combines positively with the teachers' capacity to maintain discipline (q. 9: 74,5%) and communicate with the students' families (q. 21: 76,2%), but less so with the creation of a calm relational atmosphere in the classroom (q. 17: 60,3%); however, it combines negatively with the teachers' capacity to put themselves in the students' shoes (q. 19: 46,3%).

It follows that the social interaction mostly perceived tends towards a *top down approach*, from the teacher downwards, more than the *Bottom up approach*, from the bottom upwards to the teacher, thus generating a certain difficulty in establishing an equal, balanced educational situation and thus, one could suppose, innovative.

Ethical competences suspended between feelings of esteem and respect

Of the students, 51,6% (q. 1) feel they are respected by their teachers, this feeling being closely linked to the fact that their teachers generally admit when they are wrong, do not fly off the handle during lessons (q. 6: 68,8%) and are not afraid of being judged by the students (q. 4: 67,4%). In general, teachers respect their commitments (q. 5: 86,4%) and are consistent in the principles they express and their behaviour (q. 7: 75,5%).

The typology revealed an ethical dimension, suspended between a feeling of esteem for the teacher, who seems almost perfect, does not get upset, admits his/her mistakes, accepts criticism and respects commitments, and a relational difficulty expressed by a certain weakness and fragility in his/her feeling of respect that students believe teachers have for them.

Disciplinary competences versus the knowledge society

The students state that, in most situations, teachers give clear explanations (q. 8: 72,9) and know the material well (q. 22: 79,7%); the judgment becomes rather difficult with regard to the capacity of teachers to interrelate the topics of the various lessons (q. 23: 67,6%) and gradually collapses, when one reads that only 57,4% of the teachers motivate towards study (q. 16) and 50,3% do not supply occasions for in-depth study, through activities and cultural proposals outside school (q. 24).

The scenario is illustrative of a teacher skilled in paying attention to his/her own disciplinary training as a body of knowledge closed within itself, incapable of stimulating the passion for study in young people and intersecting with fields of knowledge outside the school in order to compare themselves dialectically with the so-called knowledge society.

Scant innovative methodological competences

According to the students, their teachers use tools (q. 12: 78,5%) and discussions (q. 18: 66,4%) suitable for evaluation purposes; however, 44,0% of them find that teachers

do not help them work out a personal study method (q. 10) and 49,1% find teachers do not offer methods for more in-depth study, such as bibliographies and web sites (q. 15). Of the students interviewed, 56,9% believe teachers support comparison and collaboration in the classroom (q. 20) and are generally able to adapt the contents of the lessons to the needs of the classes and individual pupils (q. 25: 59,6%). The percentages drops as regards the variety of the teaching methods; 49,2% find there is very little differentiation (q. 26) and that many teachers prefer using only written texts (q. 27: 49,3%).

The methodological competences recorded by the students are generally expressed in the repetition of traditional teaching and learning models. New technologies remain on the fringe of the teachers' interests.

Assessment competences and social justice

Students feel their teachers do not discriminate negatively or positively in their scholastic judgements (q. 2: 66,96%), evaluate objectively (q. 11: 69,1%), give prior notification of the test evaluation criteria (q. 13: 60,7%), and explain and comment on the evaluation (q. 14: 64,8%).

In general, the students value the assessment competences of their teachers as regards both fairness in adopting the judgement criteria and the specific professional preparation used for evaluating tests. A significant number of teachers, approx. 2 out of 5, use evaluations without an analytical procedure that anticipates and comments on the tests. In the students' eyes, the teachers seemed to be more concerned about not contradicting the principle of fairness in their judgements than applying an evaluation procedure capable of functioning as a means for investing young people with responsibility and able to promote systematic studies of the effects of the evaluation.

Assessment competences are considered a relevant pathway towards acquiring a climate of social justice in the classroom, while the concern for using an evaluation useful in personal cultural development and organised for the purpose of scientific revelation, also in self-verification of their teaching, remains in the background.

Conclusions

The wide range of students and teachers from classical, scientific, technological and vocational pedagogical schools allowed us to specify four levels of knowledge: status; competences; interaction; and citizenship. In general, students appreciate their teachers as regards professional preparation, teaching ability, family involvement, responsibility and sense of duty. Students find a lack of social interaction in classroom life; teachers are not always aware of the different personalities of the students; their assessments are a form of cultural discrimination. In addition, they find school/teachers unable to offer them sufficient motivation to study. Due to the monotony of teaching methods, the learning process tends to be uniform and school-centred, hereby neglecting the equal opportunity principle and individualisation of teaching strategies. In general, teachers feel an understanding towards the students, an openness to human communication, favourable towards dialogue and the equal opportunity principle. They consider the discipline of study only part of their professional role. In general, one could say that our sample confirmed the efficiency of teachers' competences and the complete

assumption of their teaching mission. Very much criticised was the real human relationship between students and teachers: students consider teachers less democratic as regards the offer of equal opportunity education. Schools look forward to a new model of teaching and learning, which could be found in the concepts of active citizenship.

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