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Teaching styles and school models: A survey among teachers in post-university training in Italy

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Abstract

There is a lively cultural debate going on in Italy about the preparation of secondary school teachers. Increasingly more questions are arising concerning strategies for uniting university training with school-based training. During the period 1998-2010 secondary school teachers were prepared through a two-year university study, including part of an in-school training to be carried out at a school, in contact with in-service teachers and a specific scholastic context. The grounds for this university preparation was that a degree in one branch of learning, whether it be literature, mathematics, sciences or languages, was not enough for teaching in school. Instead, it was necessary to prepare a didactically oriented training curriculum. Hence, the founding of the SSSE, that is, the School of Specialisation in Secondary Education, organised according to regional authorities.

For the research we are presenting, the SSSE taken into consideration were in the Regions of: Veneto and Lombardy for Northern Italy; Lazio for Central Italy; and Campania for Southern Italy. The purpose of the research was to highlight the school and university training experience of teachers with future expectations of being professionally employed in schools and in direct contact with students.

Keywords: *Post-university Education of Teachers, School Models, Teaching Styles, Survey*

The social roots of the hypothesis

The initial hypothesis placed emphasis on the identity of the teacher hanging in the balance due to the evident contradiction between the preparation acquired and precariousness of the job. This contradiction is represented by a strong part, explained by the conviction of the necessity to possess the indispensable competences for doing the job at school well, and a weaker part, given by the awareness of the uncertainty of permanent introduction into the profession.

First of all, the fundamental questions concern the nature of the professionalism within the broadest educational system, still tied, to a Taylorist concept of education, divided between the duties of teaching at school and the upbringing reserved for the family and other territorial organisations. Secondly, as a consequence, the essential issues refer to the competences required in connection with students' high social expectations through learning.

The pedagogic-didactic literature on this subject points out the nodal points concerning the teaching role, for example: increase of discretionary power through the teaching autonomy of institutions, coordination of teaching and learning, capacity to foresee the educational needs of the students, capacity to encourage learning, investment in knowledge and professional ethics, such as the freedom and responsibility of teaching.

A professional attitude emerges, which is no longer executive, but constructive, creative, innovative and responsible, and professional competence to intermediate between needs originating from daily activities and various types of knowledge, theoretical, practical, from experience, with a view towards the best possible solution.

Within the field of education, competence, as a quality of excellent performance, follows the same phenomenology present in every other working environment.

There is a difference between competence and performance and the debate is still open about a common definition. Behaviourist approaches, aiming at the objectification and assessment, still prevail for those that use the process to advantage and propose the valuation of a task linked to practice.

The essential problem of competences in school education thus becomes the identification of indicators compatible with the vision of the professional role, task and/or practice, which cannot disregard knowledge achieved through exercising the profession.

Two particular aspects of this issue deal with competence concerning citizenship. The first, *citizenship in the profession* means that teachers should be considered persons within their rights in doing the job of teaching, whose training has a relevant impact on our society.

The second, *educating towards active citizenship*, means ensuring the opportunity of good civic participation in school life, improving dialogue and communication.

Aims of the research, sample groups and questionnaire

The research we are presenting herein examines the results collected (from a total of 466 individuals at four seats of the SSSE: Padua (80), Bergamo (115), Rome (146) and Salerno (125) with the objective of surveying the relationship between demand and supply of competences in the post-university preparation of secondary school teachers. The survey allowed for collecting quantitative and qualitative data through a questionnaire able to describe the perception and expectations of the competences. Cluster sampling led to the selection of a certain number of groups to be included in the study. The clusters were formed based on the type of study orientation: language, mathematics, technology and remedial.

The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions, 8 of which were open, with the addition of any final observations by the interviewer, as a ninth open question, not numbered; the

rest of the questions were structured in a closed form and grouped into four sections: a) socio-personal data; b) course experience; c) school experience; d) professional experience of the teachers.

Identifying socio-personal data of the sample groups

The three SSSE sample groups from Lazio, Bergamo, Padua and Salerno are typified by the following socio-demographic variables: sex, age, typology of the SSSE, province, geographic origin, degree, study, previous and current work experience, type of contract, father's and mother's educational qualification, father's and mother's profession, participation in upbringing by of other relatives.

With the exception of the sample groups from Padua, 73% of which were males, the rest of the teachers were prevalently females.

With 12%, Salerno showed a maximum number of very young teachers aged 24-27. The 49% aged 28-30 and 39% aged 31-34 have the highest representation in Padua. In Bergamo the age bracket of 31-34 prevailed with 31%. Teachers aged over 34 were mainly in Lazio (28%).

The subject-matter taught pointed out the low percentage of orientation towards mathematics and technologies at the Lazio SSSE and a high representation of remedial teachers who were very cooperative; this typology was almost absent in Padua and Bergamo and relatively present in Salerno. In Padua, technologies are the most represented orientation, mathematics in Bergamo and linguistics in Salerno.

The secondary-school diploma with a scientific orientation was the one most obtained by the teachers contacted; for the SSSE of Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno, there were also technically oriented diplomas noted. Almost completely absent was professional certification.

The sample groups from Padua and Salerno were set apart with regard to previous work experience within an educational-training context, generally in secondary-school teaching.

As regards the educational qualifications of the interviewees' parents, it was noted that practically all of the mothers had secondary school diplomas; on the other hand, in Bergamo, fathers mostly had a middle school diploma, in Lazio and Salerno they mostly had secondary school diplomas and, in Padua, university degrees. Thus, the most highly educated fathers are in Padua and those with the least qualifications are in Bergamo.

As for the professions of the interviewees' parents, housewife-mothers prevailed in the Lazio and Salerno SSSEs and teacher-mothers prevailed in Padua and Bergamo; fathers who were prevalently white-collar employees were those of the course participants from Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno, whereas fathers of participants from Padua were mostly teachers. Only in Padua did some interviewees have both parents who were teachers.

Experience of the post-university teachers' training course

In order to survey the experience of the SSSE course attended, equivalent to post-university training, five questions were proposed relative to:

1. *help from the SSSE in training for an own professional profile (first open question)*
2. the response of the SSSE to the needs of teachers and students;
3. the definition of the teacher's professional profile as proposed by the SSSE;
4. the correspondence between the professional profile and reality;
5. *the critical-scientific approach of the activities proposed (second open question).*

The first and fifth questions, open ones, showed how the sample groups intervened with significant replies, with the exception of Padua and Bergamo, for which we do not have qualitative data available.

As regards the first question, written comments from some teachers in Lazio were reported and cite, purely as an example: competences and knowledge; methods and communication; teacher-learner relationship; and the inadequacy of post-university training as preparation towards teaching at school.

As for the Lazio SSSE sample group, the critical-scientific approach of the activities proposed generally referred to the type of specialisation school. In first place was practical training, that is, the laboratory and finishing the lesson. Worthy of note is the citation of the discussion groups, only from the participants concerned with remedial teaching, as a method more consistent with the purposes indicated. As an example, the text written by some teachers, able to point out problematic aspects of the SSSE course with respect to this point, is reported below.

'In general, the lessons of "didactics of language" and "evaluation" were the most practical and useful, both classes being taught by the same teacher. Some other teachers had no idea of the aims to be reached and we, as students, realised this.'

'No course I have ever attended has been based on my previous experience or my professional prerequisites, but rather too much on university training prerequisites. At most, requests were made several times in exams to find connections between the contents proposed in the courses and our experience.'

Similar reactions came from the group from Salerno, in which, out of 94% of the replies, 45% indicated the training, 26% the laboratory and the rest, the lessons. This confirms what was already contained in the formulation of the question that indicated the teaching-theorising path as the one used by the SSSE training *procedure*.

In all of the Lazio, Bergamo, Salerno sample groups, the reflection prevailed that the SSSE was organised to reply to the needs of the teachers that teach there; only in Padua was the SSSE organised to reply more to the expectations of the students attending the

course. In addition to this, in Salerno the percentages assigned to the evaluation ‘for the teachers’ or ‘for the students’ were relatively equal, while in Lazio and Bergamo they were similar, except for a clear peak reached by Bergamo with respect to Lazio.

From the perspective of placing oneself in the shoes of the student, Padua definitely attained a priority role, by placing the teacher in second place.

The data reveals three styles of training:

- the student-centred style, perhaps school (Padua)
- the teacher-centred style, perhaps university (Bergamo, Lazio)
- the equidistant style, perhaps participatory (Salerno)

We do not know if the models were provided and theoretically prepared by SSSEs or if they were the result of the activity proposed over the last few years. In thinking about what was experienced in SSSEs, what is notable is that the teacher, on entering a classroom, actually adopts one of the three styles: by asking the students what they expect; by preparing the educational offer as an own job commitment; by asking and preparing.

Concerning the professional profile proposed, what prevailed for Padua, Lazio and Bergamo was the choice of items referring to ‘professionalism in the encounter of human relations, subjects to be taught, learning needs, internal and external organisational restrictions’, while in Salerno, the profile most chosen was the one described by the subjects to be taught.

As for the coherence between the professional teaching profile proposed and evidence given by the teachers for this profile, percentages of agreement of between 50% and 80% were reached, thus demonstrating the prevalent coherence between theory and behavioural practices.

School experience

In order to survey the school experience of teachers attending the SSSE, the following questions were proposed and relative to:

6. the meaningful encounter with some teachers for one’s own professional growth;
7. the remembrance of teachers as testimonies of humanity;
8. the appreciation of some figures;
9. the person who influenced the decision to teach;
10. *the method of one’s own training success (third open question)*
11. *the teaching vocation (fourth open question)*
12. *the connection between disciplinary awareness and being a good teacher (fifth open question)*
13. the evaluation of disciplinary and humanistic perspective of the teaching profession

Almost all of the four sample groups stated the ‘meaningful encounter with some teachers’ for their personal growth. This was predominantly true for the teachers from Lazio (95%) and of lesser importance for the teachers from Padua (81%). All participants from Padua, Salerno and Bergamo and 92% of the participants from Lazio remember at least one teacher considered as much ‘a testimony of humanity’ as a ‘constant reference’ in their jobs as teachers.

To the question intended to emphasise ‘what’ was ‘often/always’ appreciated in the teacher remembered, notable convergences were revealed among the sample groups from Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno, placing professional charisma and explanatory clarity as highest among the evaluations. On the other hand, what teachers from Padua appreciated most was the cooperation with the territory and parents and the capacity to maintain discipline in the classroom. The capacity to maintain discipline was ranked third by Lazio and Bergamo, whereas Salerno placed ‘attention to the needs of the individual’ in third place.

In thinking about the fact that charisma and clarity lead to discipline, one can observe that knowing how to maintain discipline is the result of a process of psychological (charisma) and professional (clarity) maturing in most teachers throughout the country, however, only a minority found this capacity to be one of the most appreciable in exemplary teachers. In other words, exemplarity and testimony for the vast majority of the teachers are measured on inner factors and learning while teaching rather than on strategies of dominance and on policy rule in the classroom.

Undoubtedly, the decision to want to become a teacher was heavily influenced by teachers encountered at school. To a certain extent, teachers in Padua and Salerno were also influenced by their families.

The open questions concerning training success, vocation and being a good teacher (questions 10,11,12) received different replies from the four sample groups.

For 77% of the teachers at the Lazio SSSE and 82% of the parties in Salerno, training success is linked to the relations between parents and teachers, while the survey revealed this to be 100% true for the sample groups from Bergamo and Padua.

The relationship of vocation towards teaching and choice of the SSSE recorded 100% agreement in Bergamo, 88% in Lazio, 79% in Padua and 66% in Salerno, a sign that a separation between the two variables mainly emerges in the South.

Concerning the relationship of vocation and choice of teaching, some teachers from the Lazio SSSE wrote:

No vocation: the discussion is rather a serious determination to build up teaching and educational paths that meet the new needs of a modern, European country, not a charity mission. I am very enthusiastic about my job, which is such a great necessity to our society. My enrolment in the SSSE was dictated by the volition to do it for the State and outside the academic circle.

The expression “vocation” is not correct for teachers because it refers to a supernatural idiom that does not fit into a modern culture and the social role of a teacher. I can only say that the experience of remedial teaching tends to broaden my mental horizons and scientific training.

Finally, the relationship between disciplinary competences and a good teacher once again connects the two sample groups from Bergamo and Lazio, with higher percentage values compared to Padua and Salerno, who continue to separate the two variables.

Some teachers from Lazio commented:

Essential, but not decisive. I say this because teachers may be well prepared, but if they cannot convey the concepts to the pupils, their knowledge is not used in the best possible way.

The balance between professional preparation in a technical-disciplinary sense and a human-ethical-relational sense is relatively unbalanced to the advantage of the latter preparation in all of the sample groups except that of Salerno, where a relevant weight is assigned to the former preparation, i.e. technical-disciplinary.

Professional experience

The survey on the professional experience of teachers attending the SSSE was carried out by means of six questions related thereto:

14. self-perception
15. *personal fulfilment (six open question)*
16. weak points of the teacher
17. future of the teacher
18. *one's own professional anxieties (seventh open question)*
19. *the education of young people (eighth open question)*

Concerning self-perception (question 14), teachers from Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno generally agreed about considering ‘often/always’ valid in their professional profiles, particularly explanatory clarity and attention to the needs of the individual; the choice of relational amicability and professional charisma prevailed in the group from Padua.

The comparison between what is commendable in a meaningful teacher or what is deemed important in one’s own professional profile resulted in: ‘explanatory clarity’ being appreciated and emulated in Lazio; charisma being either not appreciated or not found in Padua, but, rather, sought/emulated; in Bergamo charisma and clarity were as appreciated as much as emulated; in Salerno clarity and ‘attention to the needs of the individual’ were equally appreciated and emulated.

Evidently, explanatory clarity is a quality on which the national sample tends to converge and show considerable agreement. Philosophical items on world vision and life, as well as collaboration with parents, are pushed to the side.

About the item concerning the teaching profession for personal fulfilment, of note was some lack of reply from the sample group from Padua (89%), probably due to the difficulty in formulating a judgement in a few words and within a limited amount of time. In the other three sample groups, the teaching profession occupied an important role in personal fulfilment, and almost exclusively so in Bergamo (99%). In this regard, the teachers from the Lazio sample expressed various judgements, even relating work to the family and society.

Given the extreme uncertainty, although it is a profession I really love and that gives me great satisfaction, it shows me the problems of my society. It does not allow me to be independent; if it weren't for my commitment, the job would not fully exploit my competences. It places me in a context, in which things could be changed, but we are left alone with our purpose of change.

It definitely comes after family and my personal fulfilment as a woman and future wife, because I am convinced that, to be a good teacher, one must be happy with oneself and then with others.

As for the weak points of a teacher that can influence success in the profession, what emerged from the Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno groups as the 'scant capacity to relate', while for Padua, the weak point was indicated as 'limited professional charisma'.

In the la majority of the sample components from Padua, this result also emphasised a certain contradiction between achieved reality and desired reality, due to the fact that teachers were not found who possessed significant testimony of professional charisma and attention to the needs of the individual, but these two aspects were deemed important towards defining the professional profile of the teacher. Limited professional charisma and little attention paid to the needs of the individual were deemed weak points in this profession.

One could say that the other three sample groups, Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno, encountered experiences that allowed them to place achieved reality and a desired reality on an even scale.

Standing out about the future was the agreement among teachers in Lazio, Bergamo and Salerno in indicating how relations with the students in the classes they teach were more important, while, for Padua, the more relevant point was relations with colleagues who teach the same students they do. Connecting this reply to previous replies emphasised how the sample from Padua found that the SSSE style centres on students, appreciated the teacher's capacity to collaborate with colleagues, opted for an own professional future for a solution more analogous to the teacher-centred style and resemblance to a model of achievement rather than desire.

Significantly, and in percentages, teachers from Padua showed more sensitivity to relations with the parents of the students at school than that detected for teachers from the other sample groups.

Most of the Padua participants did not reply to the open questions about future anxieties and educating new generations, whereas replies from Bergamo groups were numerous. Among the major anxieties, the Salerno groups indicated uncertainty (76%), but emphasised the importance of ‘reassessing the profession’ and ‘professionalism’ (21%), ‘social credibility’ and improvement of the ‘system’ and ‘society’ (10%) as concerns the role of teachers in educating new generations.

Concerning anxieties, the sample group of teachers from the Lazio SSSE brought up reflections that deal with the uncertainty in the teaching role, economic issue, educational policies and social resonance of the profession.

To educate new generations well is the only way to change things that are detected as not going well in our society because changes in ideas and styles can only be done in minds that are open to learning.

Overall observations

The percentage results collected allowed for deducing some crucial notes.

The first important note was of an *emotional-experiential* nature. In general, the questionnaire was not welcomed, due to the gradual closing of the SSSE, which resulted in a lack of motivation to reply.

The second note of a *technical-methodological* nature concerned the methods of application, re-entry and statistical treatment of the data. The application of questionnaires in April-May was unsuccessful due to commitments of the participants in completing the courses. The statistical treatment of the data in the questionnaire from Lazio and Bergamo was carried out by the Bergamo unit; Padua and Salerno provided for treating their own seats. Proceeding in this manner, three different procedures were used, which hypothetically affected the final processing of the quantitative data. Rather than generalise about the results obtained, it is more appropriate to talk about emerging problems, both common and not, upon which to reflect, since they are all essential to the analysis of the teaching function in Italy and Europe.

The third note of a *pedagogic* nature dealt with educational styles pointed out, starting from the first two questions in the questionnaire. Recalling the three styles identified:

- the student-centred, more scholastic style of Padua;
- the teacher-centred, more university style of Bergamo and the Lazio;
- the equidistant, more participatory style of Salerno.

Since the first open question on the evaluation of the SSSE had to be able to be combined with the second closed question about the organisational-didactic styles used in the courses, it follows that only the Lazio SSSE was able to supply reliable data, because it combined open and closed questions. The SSSE centred on the teacher is explained, in so far as the students ask for competences, knowledge, methodologies and ‘contents that serve the teacher’ for teaching. Thus, they expect that, by attending a post-

university course, they will receive a preparation adjusted to what will be required of them in the secondary school where they will be teaching.

The fourth note was of a *scholastic* nature and referred to the comment about the previous school experience of the participants. The section of the questionnaire dealing with this area concentrated on the teacher model detected and applied. The greatest contrast was seen in the sample group from Padua and was probably ascribable to the age of the persons replying. The perception of the teachers from Padua was relatively dissimilar to the perception of the other sample groups. Teachers of Bergamo, Salerno, Lazio showed more consistency between the model of an appreciated teacher and that of a reproduced teacher. For example, Padua appreciated the collegiate character and capacity to maintain discipline, and understood how important is to reproduce charisma and amicability. However, in the other three sample groups, there was an exemplary continuity between the appreciation and reproduction of charisma and explanatory capacity, which combines well for an internal consistency of the reciprocal values of communication, referring to the psychological and professional maturing of the teacher.

The fifth, *professional* note concerned know how to relate and how to be, these are the teacher's strengths: relating as an external strength, professional charisma as an internal strength.

From that is emerging the idea and the experience of the teachers who are active citizens in a changing school.

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