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Methodological-didactic teacher education in Italian secondary school and competence assessment[1]

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Abstract

The paper aims to reflect on the training of teachers in Italian lower and upper secondary schools by presenting the training activities carried out by the Pegaso Telematic University in the provision of the training course foreseen by Ministerial Decree 180/2022. The first training activities focused on the training of the course tutors, while the second focused on the feedback given to the teachers who followed the course, following the development of the competence assessment. The aim of this paper is to reflect on the replicability of the training actions presented and the lines of research that open up.

Keywords: *teacher education, assessment methods, competence assessment*

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to reflect on teacher training, in particular in Italian secondary schools, in the light of the recent legislation on training following the extraordinary competitive procedures for tenure; the subject of the paper is therefore centred on the context of the course for the acquisition of 5 ECTS (university credits) by teachers who have successfully passed the extraordinary competitive procedure for access to the roles of first and second grade secondary schools on commonplace, a course offered by the Pegaso Telematic University, as provided for by Ministerial Decree 180/2022. Two training actions carried out within the course are presented: the first concerned the training of four didactic tutors whose role was to support the trainees, together with the teachers, in the preparation of the competence assessment. The second action, on the other hand, concerns the feedback given to the trainees on the competence assessment.

1. Teacher education in Italy

Teacher education in Italy has had a long and tortuous journey (Cappa et al., 2013). Without going into detail about the stages of this tortuous journey, we would like to highlight the role of the institutions involved in initial teacher education, especially for secondary schools. With the creation of the SSIS (Scuole di Specializzazione per l'Insegnamento Secondario - "Schools of Specialisation for Secondary Education") in the early 1990s, the training of secondary school teachers was delegated to the universities (Law 341, 1990, art. 4, GU, 1990). The duration of the SSIS was two years and, according to the provisions of Ministerial Decree no. 153 of 1998 (GU, 1998), into four areas: training for the teaching function, training content of the addresses, laboratory with specific reference to the training content of the addresses, and internship (Cappa et al., 2013). The training system was designed to combine aspects purely related to the teaching disciplines with the knowledge of educational sciences, recalling the "pedagogical encyclopaedia" proposed by Visalberghi

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(1978), which, although considered a schematic model, highlighted the continuity between the disciplines of psychological, sociological, methodological and didactic fields and the contents considered fundamental to deal with educational issues (De Landsheere, 1978; Lucisano & Salerni, 2002, Pontecorvo, 1979).

Decree 249 of 10 September 2010 (GU, 2011) replaced the SSIS secondary teacher training with the one-year TFA (Tirocinio Formativo Attivo - "Active Training Apprenticeship"), with access after a bachelor's degree; this route was also delegated to universities. In the TFA framework, initial training is structured around psycho-pedagogical and educational science disciplines, the internship carried out in a school and supervised by a tutor teacher, and the didactic-disciplinary approach. The TFA was also short-lived and Law 107 of 2015 (GU, 2015) devised a new training pathway: the FIT (Formazione Iniziale e Tirocinio - "Initial Training and Apprenticeship"), established by Legislative Decree 59 of 2017 (GU, 2017) and then supplemented by Ministerial Decree 616 of 2017 (MIUR, 2017). The life of the FIT was even shorter, as it was abolished the following year. What remains of the FIT is the acquisition of 24 preparatory training credits for the teaching qualification (Trinchero et al., 2020). The training of secondary school teachers by universities has moved from a pathway that was apparently considered too long, such as the two-year SSIS pathway, to the mere acquisition of 24 ECTS. All these paths lead to a reflection not only on the link between theory and practice, examining the criticisms of what has actually been achieved in the training courses, such as the relevance of some courses offered by universities and not specifically redesigned for the training of the target teachers (Cappa et al., 2013; Trinchero et al, 2020), but also the disregarded timetables that should have brought many more teachers to the chair.None of the above pathways and the associated recruitment conditions have proven to be an effective solution to a precariat that has become "structural" (Argentin, 2018, p. 140), resulting in a series of "extraordinary" ways for teachers to become permanent.Thus, competitions for unqualified precarious workers have been held, also taking advantage of the difficult conditions generated by Covid-19 (Bertagna, 2020). Law No. 73 of 25 May 2021 (GU, 2021) provides for urgent measures related to the epidemiological emergency, which was followed by Ministerial Decree 180 of 2022 (GU, 2022), which regulates the modalities of the extraordinary competition procedure by class of competition; article 18 of the Ministerial Decree establishes that the pathway implemented by the universities is divided into 40 hours of training activities corresponding to 5 ECTS, to be completed by 15 June 2023. The 5 ECTS are divided into 3 ECTS for the scientific disciplinary area MPED/03 Didactics and Special Pedagogy, which concerns training in the cultural-disciplinary, methodological-didactic and formative-professional dimensions; 1 ECTS for SPS/07 General Sociology, which concerns training in the organisational and institutional-social dimensions; and finally 1 ECTS for MPED/04 Experimental Pedagogy, which focuses on the preparation of a competence assessment and subsequent individual development project. The final assessment takes the form of an oral examination. "The final assessment is based on the mastery of the content, the use of appropriate definitions and theoretical references, the clarity of exposition, the command of the professional language and is considered passed by candidates who obtain a positive assessment" (Art. 18, para. 7, GU, 2022).

2. The two training actions of the Pegaso Telematic University in the teacher training course

The training activities for the acquisition of the 5 ECTS, defined by Ministerial Decree 180/2022, were developed by Pegaso Telematic University to launch the course for teachers who had successfully passed the extraordinary competitive procedure for access to the roles of first and second grade secondary schools on Commonplace.

The course, provided by Pegaso in e-learning mode, offered the 1235 students enrolled, who were guaranteed two exam dates per month until 15 June 2023, 24/7 access to specially developed teaching materials available on the platform. The large number of participants required an effective, efficient and coordinated organisation from the four course tutors, who were able to rely on the teaching support of four specially trained tutors. Two training actions are described: the training of the four didactic tutors and the feedback comments to the trainees.

2.2 The first training action: training of course tutors

The management of the 5 ECTS course involved four lecturers from the Pegaso Telematic University, belonging to the scientific disciplinary sectors (SSD) provided for in the regulations of the aforementioned course (MPED/03 Didactics and Special Pedagogy, SPS/07 General Sociology, MPED/04 Experimental Pedagogy). Each lecturer, together with a didactic tutor, forms the oral examination board. A total of thirteen online examination sessions were held between December 2022 and June 2023, with an average of 100 trainees per session. The first training action concerned the training of the four didactic tutors, whose role was to support the trainees, together with the teachers, in the preparation of the competence assessment (Bastone, 2021; Buccolo, 2006; Di Francesco, 2015; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Serreri, 2006).

The training of the four tutors, carried out by the course lecturers, aimed at providing the basic elements to know and interpret the structure and elaboration of the competence assessment, therefore the tutors were provided with scientific material to consult on the subject. This first action, carried out individually by the tutors, was followed by a two-hour online training on the specific aspects of the competence assessment for each tutor, and then by a training activity that could be described as "in the field", consisting in the reading of a competence assessment by the lecturer together with the didactic tutor, in order to detect the reflections written by the trainees on their competences and to construct a personalised question for the trainees during the oral examination. The framework for the construction of the competence assessment

format and the guidelines for its construction are provided by Perrenoud (2002), who identifies ten competence areas. Therefore, a format was constructed, organised into the ten competence domains, and a file of compilation instructions. The training of the teaching tutors focused precisely on the feedback commentary for each paper written by the trainees and uploaded in the appropriate section of the university platform, and on the respect of the instructions provided for the compilation of the written paper.

It is necessary to deepen the debate on competence assessment because, unlike in the French and Canadian contexts (Gaudron, Bernaud & Lemoine, 2001; Gonnet, 2019; Lemoine, 2005), in Italy this tool is not regulated by law (Buccolo, 2006); however, it represents the implementation of a necessary action to support one's professional and vocational choices. Buccolo (2006) defines the assessment of competences as "an orientation tool that helps to take stock of 'oneself' by discovering aptitudes, interests, skills and competences that may be undiscovered and potential, and therefore unknown to the subject himself or herself [...] it necessarily sees the subject as the protagonist of his or her own choices and life project; at the end of the path, the beneficiary will have an awareness and consciousness of his or her competences" (p. 37).

In Italy, at national level, ISFOL (Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori - "Institute for the Development of Workers' Vocational Training", renamed INAPP - Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche - "National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies" - in 2016), published in 2008 a technical document on competence assessment (ISFOL, 2008) with the intention of proposing a common definition of this practice, which had been the subject of previous publications by the Institute (ISFOL, 2007). ISFOL (2008) describes competence assessment as an intervention methodology centred on the vocational and work orientation of adults, "which aims to promote reflection and self-awareness of competences acquired in different life contexts, in order to make them transferable and usable in the redefinition and replanning of one's training-work pathway" (p. 6). While recognising the diversity of practices and experiments carried out in Italy in different research contexts on the issue of competence assessment, ISFOL's definition focuses on the intention to promote reflective practices driven by balance, which makes it "a tool with a strong social value, indispensable to strengthen employability through the definition of individual projects" (ISFOL, 2008, p. 6). Accepting this definition, Lorenzi, Serbati and Vianello (2016) attribute two functions to competence assessment: that of reconstructing experiences and valorising acquired competences, and that of elaborating a professional project. Therefore, on the basis of the literature on competence assessment and the experiments carried out in Italy by INDIRE (Istituto Nazionale Documentazione, Innovazione, Ricerca Educativa - "National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, Educational Research", https://neoassunti.indire. en/2023/), the competence assessment format developed by the Pegaso Telematic University follows the macro-dimensions of competences (learning sphere, teacher's work outside the classroom, construction and meaning of the profession) highlighted by Perrenoud (2002) and argued by Viteritti (2004), but implements specific aspects in the dimensions of the sub-areas of competences, in particular regarding the dimension of "pedagogical" assessment (Corsini, 2023; Grion et al., 2022; Trinchero, 2018), which is a hot topic in the current Italian debate.

The competence dimensions, with their associated sub-competences, were developed by Perrenoud (2002) together with local education authorities, school principals and teachers' associations; therefore, they come from the field of practice and not only from an abstract reflection; for this reason, the sub-competences described below show that situated and relational character (Viteritti, 2004) that characterises the competence as contextual and planning.

2.3 The second training action: feedback for trainees

The second training action of the 5 ECTS course, on the other hand, concerned the feedback given to the trainees on the competence assessment. Trainees uploaded their work in the appropriate section of the platform, following the format and instructions provided. The ten dimensions of competence proposed by Perrenoud (2002), as interpreted by Viteritti (2004), were included in the instructions and the way they were compiled was explained.

The general structure of the format was as follows:

1. *Macro-area of competences related to learning/teaching*
   - *1.1 Organisation of learning situations:*
     - 1.1.1 Knowing the content to be taught for a given discipline
     - 1.1.2 translating knowledge and content into learning objectives,
     - 1.1.3 organising teaching on the basis of pupils' representations,
     - 1.1.4 redirecting teaching away from learning errors and obstacles,
     - 1.1.5 construct and plan instructional sequences,
     - 1.1.6 involving pupils in research activities and/or projects.
   - *1.2 Managing learners' progress:*
     - 1.2.1 devise and implement situations/problems appropriate to the students' possibilities,
     - 1.2.2 taking a medium to long term view (semester or school year) of the teaching objectives,
     - 1.2.3 observe and evaluate learners in learning situations, according to a formative approach,
     - 1.2.4 discussing and sharing assessment criteria with students,
     - 1.2.5 providing timely feedback with a high rate of information on performance, and process, which helps pupils to question their choices amd provide guidance on choices and their implementation

1.3 Designing and implementing differentiation devices:
- 1.3.1 Managing the heterogeneity of a class group,
- 1.3.2 breaking down barriers,
- 1.3.3 working with students with great difficulty,
- 1.3.4 develop cooperation between pupils.

1.4 Involving pupils in their learning:
- 1.4.1 arouse the desire to learn,
- 1.4.2 Making explicit the relationship between knowledge and the meaning of school work,
- 1.4.3 develop the capacity for self-assessment in the pupil,
- 1.4.4 negotiating different types of rules with pupils,
- 1.4.5 offer training activities of students' choice,
- 1.4.6 encourage the definition of a student's project.

1.5 Working in teams:
- 1.5.1 developing a group (or small group) teaching project,
- 1.5.2 lead debates,
- 1.5.3 face and analyze complex situations, practices, problems, and conflicts together.

2. *Macro-area of competencies related to the teacher's work outside the classroom:*

2.1 Involvement in school management
- 2.1.1 drawing up and/or negotiating an institute project,
- 2.1.2 managing school resources,
- 2.1.3 coordinating, and animating the school with all stakeholders (extracurricular, neighborhood, parents' associations, etc.),
- 2.1.4 organizing and developing pupil Participation within the school.

2.2 Parental information and involvement:
- 2.2.1 lead information and discussion meetings,
- 2.2.2 Involving parents in the enhancement of knowledge building,
- 2.2.3 sharing student assessment criteria with Parents
- 2.2.4 accepting suggestions and suggestions for improvement from parents.

2.3 Use of digital technologies:
- 2.3.1 use software/programs for document processing,
- 2.3.2 communicating (meeting) at a distance using digital devices,
- 2.3.3 1.1.1. use multimedia tools.

3. *Macro-area of competencies related to the profession and training:*

3.1 Dealing with duties and dilemmas of the profession:
- 3.1.1 prevent acts of violence at School,
- 3.1.2 fight prejudice and discrimination,
- 3.1.3 participate in the construction of rules of common life at school,
- 3.1.4 Analysing the pedagogical relationship, leadership, and communication at school,
- 3.1.5 develop and implement a sense of responsibility and solidarity.

3.2 Managing one's continuing education:
- 3.2.1 know how to make their teaching practices explicit,
- 3.2.2 draw up their competence assessment and update it constantly,
- 3.2.3 planning one's program of continuing education,
- 3.2.4 negotiate a joint training project with colleagues (group, school, network).

For each sub-competence area (i.e. those numbered with two digits), the trainees could choose one of the specific competences (those numbered with three digits), describe it and justify it on the basis of their own professional experience. Since the central idea of the competence assessment is also to identify aspects to be improved, the trainees had to select, for each specific competence they had chosen, one of the three levels according to which they considered the specific competence to be possessed, thus indicating whether the specific competence was "not possessed", "partially possessed" or "fully possessed". It was suggested that, at the end of the statements, any examples of the specific competence drawn from personal experience should also be reported. Once the work was uploaded to the platform, teachers and tutors proceeded to read the work and run it through anti-plagiarism software. In terms of the outcome, the platform provides a default of 'adequate' and 'inadequate', corresponding to 'pass' and 'fail', and an open field for a return comment on the paper. By way of example, a comment for a 'pass' outcome might be: "The paper constantly recalls personal professional experience and the link between the various specific competences described shows the reflective process undertaken to write the paper; competences not possessed are described, recognising the need for specific training". On the other hand, an "insufficient" result comment, given in the case of partial completion of the work, resulting in a feedback message for a "failed test", is: "Half of the competences proposed by the format are not present in the paper, which is therefore partial; moreover, the sub-competences for each area have not been indicated in the appropriate space of the format, making it difficult in some cases to understand which specific competence is being referred to. It is requested that the missing parts

be completed by following the instructions for writing the paper, also highlighting any experiences related to the competence chosen to be described". The invitation to reflect on the experience (Szpunar, 2019) is intended to guide the learner, who may not have thought about linking classroom experiences, even if brief, with the theoretical references discussed in the lectures on the platform; thus also recalling the indications for drafting the budget. Following the feedback message, a customised question is written for each assignment in a file shared by the course lecturers and tutors, recalling a specific point covered in the budget; this question will be the starting point for the discussion in the oral examination.

The construction of the customised question was also the subject of training for the tutors, since the intention was to construct questions that could lead to reflection "on the action", to think about how to develop reflexive actions "in the action" (Schön, 2006), also for further education.

Conclusions

At the time of writing, the 5 ECTS course is still ongoing and nearing completion. During the examination sessions already completed, many trainees expressed their appreciation of the course as a whole and found the oral examination a useful and important experience to discuss some of the teaching and innovative practices described by their colleagues during the presentation. Based on this input during the oral examination, it was decided to design and administer a questionnaire to measure satisfaction with the course, both in terms of specific elements, such as the attitude of the lecturers and tutors towards the trainees, and in terms of overall satisfaction with the course (Litteri et al., 2022).

In this way, we expect to know those elements of the training that, for the teachers, constitute elements of satisfaction for the perceived quality of the service (Litteri et al., 2022), because it is essential to consider the dimension of satisfaction with the training results when evaluating a training course, given that the objective of the trainees is to have better competences after the training and that the results also depend on the quality of the service provided (Dinh et al., 2021).

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