

SOCIALIZING TO THE PROFESSION. THE ROLE OF TRAINEESHIP IN TEACHER TRAINING

SOCIALIZARE ALLA PROFESSIONE. IL RUOLO DEL TIROCINIO NELLA FORMAZIONE DEGLI INSEGNANTI

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ABSTRACT

Learning experiences in work contexts contribute to the definition of experiences and representations about the profession, that affect the construction of professional identity. Traineeships as work-integrated learning, which can impact on the processes of professional socialisation and preparation for work, fall within this scope. The results of an exploratory study carried out with Primary Education Science students at the University of Reggio Calabria (Italy) suggest possible implications for research and teacher training.

Le esperienze di apprendimento nei contesti di lavoro contribuiscono alla definizione di vissuti e rappresentazioni sulla professione, che incidono sulla costruzione dell'identità professionale. In tale ambito ricade il tirocinio come work-integrated learning che può impattare sui processi di socializzazione professionale e di preparazione al lavoro. I risultati di uno studio esplorativo realizzato con studenti di Scienze della formazione primaria dell'Università di Reggio Calabria, suggeriscono possibili implicazioni per la ricerca e la formazione degli insegnanti.

KEYWORDS

teacher training; professional identity; traineeship
formazione degli insegnanti; identità professionale; tirocinio

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Introduction

Identity as a product of social relations is the basic assumption running through this paper. The idea that subjects have of themselves and the ways in which they manage their lives is a direct reflection of the social experiences they experience on a daily basis in the various social contexts: from the primary sphere of the family to the various spheres of social living, of which the professional one is prevalent. Contexts that act powerfully in defining the subjective ways of interpreting the world through the internalisation of gestures, attitudes, behaviour, codes, languages; meanings that have a decisive impact on the cognitive, social and affective levels of the subjects, generating a transformation.

Self-formation as subject, however, also occurs through the development of structures for constructing meaning and interpreting reality that originate, not only from the exchange with the other, but also from the location that this exchange generates within the interactive context of social reality. The Self is, therefore, a social product due to the fact that the subject's knowledge apparatuses derive from the relationship with relational contexts.

In this setting, work experiences contribute to the construction of a professional identity that affects personal identity - and changes with it - implicitly intervening in systems of representation of self, others and the socio-cultural world.

The processes of identification with one's professional category determines one's subjective 'outlook' on the world, delineating a point of observation of reality that also concerns the position that this category embodies socially: work as a teacher or engineer means to be a teacher or engineer.

Attention on the training level to the processes of construction and development of professional identity represents one of the central nodes of pedagogical research on teacher training, first of all by virtue of the need to re-define the cultural profile of teachers and orient it towards a more critical-reflective attitude. Therefore, those activities take on value which - by fulfilling the function of socialising to the profession - act as a glue between university education and real working practices; in the framework outlined, the traineeship presents itself as a fundamental identity learning experience, during which the relationship to professional knowledge inevitably translates into a first approach to the profession.

1. The value of identity in teaching training

The teacher's socio-professional context constitutes a working environment where, in particular, the variable and complex dimensions that define it, constitute determining elements in influencing processes for constructing a sense of Self.

Belonging to the school work context, in the professional role of teacher, corresponds, in this sense, to a continuous process of identity construction: can determine both a condition of well-being - in relation to the satisfaction of self-fulfilling needs - and the affirmation/construction of an identity recognised as effective/competent within the social reality; a condition of frustration, bewilderment and dissatisfaction, connected to the conflicting relationship between the human, socio-affective, expressive needs of the Self and the actual systems of expectations/action, defined as necessary constraints within the professional context itself.

Professional teaching experience, thus, influences both the construction of the subject's expectation/action systems and the definition/interpretation of their own behaviour.

In dynamic and complex teachers' professional experience, the subject impacts with a multitude of system variables: socio-cultural, organizational, relational, emotional, cognitive, tacitly reposed and handed down in the context itself, with respect to which the professional training received often proves unable to offer adequate interpretative and predictive models; many teachers, often, feel a discrepancy between knowledge acquired during their training and the concreteness of the situation, with respect to which the need to reconfigure themselves and their own knowledge systems through adaptation dynamics may emerge.

The university's necessary openness to the world of work therefore requires it to ask itself: how does one learn a profession; what knowledge today's professional needs; how to train competent professionals; how to design learning that enables the construction of expert skills and above all of transversal skills, which are increasingly strongly recommended by the labour market.

These transversal competences refer to the construction of an aptitude for problem-solving, the development of critical and creative identities, mental flexibility, communication-relational skills, knowing how to work in a team, knowing how to organise work and how to manage time and stress, developing a

sense of adaptation and self-direction, a spirit of initiative and, lastly, planning (Bernardini, 2015: 34-36).

The critical issues expressed in the school's professional context regarding the definition of the teacher's professional identity, refer to the difficulty of perceiving a constant self-confirmation, through the conscious link with an experiential horizon that plays the necessary anchoring role for the construction of a stable sense of the self-identity. The difficulty in perceiving a constant self-image may entail the inability to project such an image within a future perspective.

The pedagogical interest in this theme is thus substantiated in the attempt to make explicit the influence of professional identity - understood as a construct - on processes of change and training. On a methodological level, this translates into how to prefigure critical-reflexive training interventions, centred on uncovering the constructive processes of identity as processes that shape the individual and his or her socio-cultural destiny.

The development of a critical capacity as a professional competence of teachers assumes a mediating value between the decision-making/operational processes and the perspectives of meaning that guide these processes; this prerogative directs educational practices in a reflexive and transformative perspective. That is, teachers need the development of awareness processes, on the one hand, and the consolidation of the system of their own competences, on the other; the unravelling of the personal and social pathways that have built up the representations they have about the profession constitutes the possible focus of a professional training oriented by reflexivity (Striano, Melacarne, Oliverio, 2018).

The way of thinking about one's professional Self is the result of the knowledge that, constructing permanence and continuity within a history, implicitly expresses the complex of values, points of view and beliefs - but also concerns and discomforts - that determine the way of thinking and acting of individuals.

Individual and collective processes of identity construction become, therefore, a pedagogical focus when they become the object of reflection through a re-examination of the complex dynamics that determine them.

This process of vocational training is structured on a need for growth and learning, which results in a transformation of the perspectives and meaning systems generated by the tacit dimensions of experience; this implies a transformation of the ways in which one's professional role is interpreted and, therefore, a shift to

self-awareness, which in turn takes the form of a consolidation of an aptitude to reflexive learning for reflexive action.

In this sense, professional training qualifies as an intentional process that guides the individual in the construction of the professional Self and the work context as an actively and critically constructed intersubjective representation.

2. Traineeship as a practical learning setting

Professional identity is an organisational structure of the Self that provides a behavioural guide for work and on the development of which reflective activities, learning communities, supportive professional relationships, and the quality of contexts and experiences have an important influence.

Although pedagogical studies highlight the centrality of the process of identity construction and development in teaching professionalism, and the indications for teaching training centred on the exercise of identity are precise, the latter still too often remains unexplored in training practice.

The challenge, therefore, is still to consider the construction and development of professional identity an intentional objective of training courses.

As suggested by the literature in the field, practice-based education (PBE), that is, all those work-integrated approaches (WIL) situated and contextualised and aim at creating practical learning settings that are conducive to the formation of critical professional identities, can be effective in terms of training. This refers to training activities that are not merely practice-centred, but rather based on the integration of academic learning with real experience, of action with reflection.

For these reasons, WIL represents a functional training approach within the discourse on the construction and development of teachers' professional identity.

It is clear that the approach needs to be declined into a focused identity exercise, which must be nurtured through contact with professional practice, actors and work culture.

In this regard, many studies have focused on the results of work preparation and socialisation programmes and have emphasised the role played by practical traineeships in the development of professional identity (Bonometti, 2013; Chin et al., 2020; Melacarne, Bonometti, 2014), on the modification of the professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motivations and experiences.

Traineeship, as a concrete and immersive context for "learning the teacher's job" (Bandini, 2018, p. 9), qualifies as a decisive experience for the formation of the teacher's identity, supporting the subject to assign a meaning to himself that shapes his attitudes, emotions and work behaviour (Siebert, 2005).

The growing interest in traineeship activities focuses, in particular, on the link between the learning experiences that take place in the classroom and those that take place in work contexts (Bandini, Calvani, Capperucci, 2018); but also on the impact that WIL activities can have on professional identity formation. Although many studies have long since shown that contact with practice strongly models the development of professional identity (Campbell, Zegwaard, 2011; Izadinia, 2013; Lamote, Engels, 2010; West, Chur– Hansen, 2004) the aspects that can coherently relate the training objectives of the academic curriculum with the identification/application of training strategies that critically prepare the student to face and evaluate the work placement experience still remain to be investigated.

The latter is not to be considered as a neutral, objective and standardised event, during which the trainee applies theories, observes and replicates practices (Trede, 2012); the learning process during the practical traineeship should be configured according to a reflexive-participative logic, through which precisely the most subjective aspects of the experience can allow the construction of critical meanings on the profession and on oneself as a professional.

As reported by several studies, in fact, WIL activities become functional to the development of identity insofar as they place the student in an active position, offering him/her the possibility to negotiate meanings, perspectives and decisions with the future professional community and, therefore, to play an agent role on his/her own identity pathway.

Therefore, full participation in practice during the training activity represents one of the central nodes of the issue that, on the training level, translates into the need to identify and provide trainees with the tools to understand how to participate and critically observe the work context.

These theoretical assumptions need to be translated and applied in a WIL curriculum - centred on the development of professional identity - which can be guided through the explication of certain key dimensions. These include the problematisation of student participation; the activation of a discussion on professionalism and professional identity; the ability of students and school tutors to ask questions (Ibidem); and also, as pointed out by Chin et al. (2020) in a review of the literature on apprenticeship programmes, reflexivity, mentoring,

professional socialisation, self-efficacy-goal orientation and critical thinking. The latter are identified by scholars as real indicators (Professional Identity Development - PID) within a model for professional identity development through apprenticeship (Self-Determination Theory - SDT). It consists of three components: Think, Act and Feel, to which precise dimensions of professional identity development correspond.

Think refers (a) reflexivity (cognitive processes of analysing and judging what happens and creating meaning) and (b) critical thinking (ability to ask questions, suggest alternatives and be creative). In the second dimension - Act - self-efficacy and goal orientation, i.e. self-confidence and competence in task performance; intrinsic motivation to learn and achieve task mastery in a safe environment that allows for practical work experience in a multidisciplinary setting. Finally, the third component - Feel - includes: (a) Professional socialisation (sense of belonging and meaning for one's position in the wider society through interaction with stakeholders) and (b) Mentoring (mutual relationship in which the mentor supports the mentee's personal and professional development).

The arguments briefly proposed and the scientific evidence highlight the complexity and interaction of the components at play in practical traineeship activities and, more generally, in the formation of professional identity; especially in the case of initial teacher training, the learning models proposed during practical traineeship activities are declined in ways of relating to knowledge that inevitably become approaches to the profession.

For these reasons, the ways in which one comes into contact with and learns work during university training are presented as determining the possibility - for future professionals - of filtering with a critical attitude the possible forms of recursiveness and automatism that may characterise teaching and prevent its transformation/evolution (Cunti, Priore, 2020).

3. *What, how and from whom did I learn during my traineeship? An exploratory study conducted at the 'Mediterranea' University of Reggio Calabria*

The object of investigation of the exploratory study carried out concerns students' perceptions of the placement experience. In particular, the prospective objective is to monitor the direct practical traineeship programme in order to define an identikit of activities/practices carried out and explore the nature of professional

learning, in terms of its impact on the construction of professional identity and the acquisition of specific skills. The study is configured as the first phase of a broader research project, aimed at designing an apprenticeship programme explicitly oriented towards the critical formation of professional identity and the construction of training tools/strategies that can support the student in this process.

A total of 252 students enrolled in the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences at the 'Mediterranea' University of Reggio Calabria participated in the study. The participants have an average age of 27 years (min=19; max=54) and are enrolled in year II (N=84), year III (N=75) and year IV (N=93) respectively. The students enrolled in year II are in their first traineeship experience (T1), while those in years III and IV are in their second (T2) and third experience (T3) respectively.

In order to achieve the set objectives, a questionnaire was constructed, subdivided into a part with Likert scale questions and another of a narrative type; the latter responds to the need to know in depth the subjective point of view of the students with respect to the lived experience. In the latter case, the focus of the research is on the interpretative categories and vocabulary used by the participants; the aim is to codify them taking into account their situativeness and meaningfulness.

The questionnaires were collected online, with guaranteed anonymity, through a Google form during indirect traineeship activities (university context), which normally take place in parallel with the direct traineeship (school context).

The tool used is divided into specific thematic areas concerning:

- school Tutor and the nature of the relationship with the Trainee;
- activities into which the traineeship is divided;
- impact in terms of socialisation and development of professional identity;
- contribution in terms of development/acquisition of professional skills;
- role played by the experience in terms of professional orientation.

The quantitative data collected from the administration of the questionnaire were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, while the qualitative data were subjected to content analysis, with the support of the Atlas.ti software.

The presentation of the results is broken down according to the thematic areas investigated.

3.1 The relationship between tutor and trainee

From the participants' point of view, the relationship between school tutor and trainee takes on a positive value and is considered enriching and formative when it is based on professionalism, trust, collaboration, exchange and mutual help. The following are some text passages produced by the participants in response to the question "How would you define your relationship with the tutor?"

Confident, mutual collaboration was never lacking.

Empathetic and strong collaboration.

Based on exchange and reciprocity.

Functional and formative relationship, based on trust and collaboration.

At the same time, a negative side of the relationship also emerges, which concerns the presence of an excessive relational "formality" that would prevent trainees from feeling really involved in the experience; in this regard, students report that the lack of sharing the teaching methods adopted in class - in their opinion too "traditional" - contributed in some cases to make it difficult to participate in the activities. According to the trainees, the choice of frontal teaching methods would not only fail to foster pupils' learning, but would also make the traineeship experience itself less formative. What follows are some text excerpts produced by the participants:

Our relationship was cordial and uninvolved.

It was an essential and formal relationship.

We had a cold and detached relationship.

I did not share his overly traditional teaching methodologies.

3.2 The role of the School Tutor

With regard to the role played by the tutor in the traineeship experience, the participants' answers highlight an articulated pattern of training action. It appears to focus on the tutor's ability to

- offer oneself as an example or model to follow ("she inspired me"; "she played the role of model, since, having never worked in a school, I found myself in a new

environment so I observed the tutors in their work organisation, in their relationship with colleagues and pupils, in their methodological choices and in the use of aids");

- accompanying, guiding and facilitating the trainee during the activities ("she accompanied me in all phases of the experience with great commitment and interest"; "she played the role of accompanist, implementing empathic and collaborative strategies"; "she facilitated my presence in the classroom ensuring me moments of professional growth");

- instructing, which participants identify through the actions of "clarifying doubts", "explaining and showing how it is done", "giving feedback on the activities carried out" and "making people experiment by playing the role of supervisor"¹.

In this framework, for the participants, the emotional side of the tutor-trainee relationship takes on an important value, as already mentioned with reference to the dichotomy that emerged on the type of relationship: trust/empathy vs. formality/detachment. Here too, the tutor's role takes on formative value when it is positively characterised on the emotional side: "he motivated me", "she managed to involve me", "she was close to me and put me at ease", "she encouraged me and put me to the test".

3.3 Traineeship subdivision activities

Analysis of the data collected, regarding the type of activities, shows that they can be summarised through two macro-categories:

- the non-participative role of the trainee, understood as a "passive" observer of the activities and dynamics of the class;

¹ These conclusions are similar to the framework outlined in another research (Ferro Allodola, 2016, p. 216), which highlights the following functions of the tutor:

- guide, follow the trainee during the traineeship process, directing him/her in carrying out work practices;

- facilitate, be a mediator between company and university and facilitate inclusion in the community of professional practices;

- reassure, trying to eliminate the anxieties and uncertainty that a new situation can cause in the trainee, maintaining a constant attitude of listening and being available and open to interpersonal relationships;

- legitimize, for example by emphasizing the importance and usefulness of the intern's job, valuing her contribution to the company;

- explain, clarify doubts, questions, unclear aspects of the task to be performed and/or of the communicative-relational dynamics in the context of the traineeship.

- the active role that the student can play and the contribution he/she can make to the lesson, the planning of teaching activities and the construction of the classroom climate.

The following emerged from the participants' responses:

Observation of the school environment, observation of the teaching role, observation of programming.

Observation of the correction of tests, programming and learning units.

I observed the class and the methodologies used by the teacher. I carried out a lesson in agreement with the tutor.

In the preschool class, the tutor gave me a small group of children to work with.

I participated in an interactive lesson in collaboration with the class teacher.

On the other hand, as the following text passages show, in some circumstances the trainee's activity is directed towards supporting pupils with learning difficulties, which would seem to represent cases of difficult management in the absence of the support teacher. This last aspect - although it is recounted by the trainees as a fact that qualifies the experience and enhances their skills - also reveals critical aspects concerning the trainees' involvement in situations and contexts that would require specific training.

It is evident that - despite the fact that for the trainee this may represent a source of gratification and also a way of experimenting with activities considered 'difficult' or 'for experts' - there is a risk of excessively widening the trainee's sphere of competence, especially if this activity is not appropriately supported by the tutor, who is also called upon to manage any sense of inadequacy on the part of the student. Below are some reflections produced by the research participants:

I helped children with the greatest needs and learning difficulties, but it was difficult.

I gave support both to the teachers but also to the children who had difficulties.

I listened, collaborated, helped children in the class group and the child with difficulties.

I was dedicated to assisting children with difficulties in doing their homework, but I did not always know what to do.

3.4 Skills acquired

Participants were asked to draw up a balance sheet of the skills acquired during the traineeship, from which emerged a branched set of areas of experience concerning in particular:

- teaching methodologies ("how to set up a lesson"; "learning teaching methods and strategies")
- disciplines and learning ("designing multidisciplinary work", "organising and selecting disciplinary content in relation to cognitive structures, learning styles and pupils' learning needs");
- school's organisational context ("how to organise and plan", "knowing the basic documents", "knowledge of the school's organisational dynamics, the functioning of the school's management bodies and their impact on teaching activities")
- educational relations ("classroom management"; "learning to interact with children"; "relations with colleagues and other professionals");
- construction and development of the professional identity ("understanding the teacher's role and work"; "knowing how to recognise one's limits and strengths"; "acquiring autonomy and confidence"; "constructing the professional self"; "awareness and critical capacity"; "identifying the responsibilities of a teacher")
- context and child observation ("developing tools for observation", "knowing how to observe and evaluate the classroom context", "thanks to the work placement, I learnt to observe the classroom context more carefully").

Across the different areas identified by the participants, the importance of acquiring creative skills and flexible management of the school role and activities emerges.

3.5 Changing Self in relation to the profession

In the light of their training experience, participants were asked to identify the level of professionalism they had achieved by choosing from four different options: 'novice', 'advanced beginner', 'competent', 'expert'. The results show that 50.59% of the participants believe they have reached the level of 'advanced beginner', while 31.22% consider themselves 'competent'.

If the data are analysed taking into account the course year variable and, therefore, the broader placement experience of third-year (2 placements) and fourth-year (3 placements) students, the levels of perceived professionalism show a more significant percentage of second-year students (at their first placement experience) who place themselves at the "novice" level (23.80%), than third- and fourth-year students who place themselves at the "competent" level (34.66% and 33.33%).

It seems clear that from the second and third traineeship experiences, trainees perceive their own level of professionalism progressively more positively.

3.6 Career Guidance Processes

With reference to the role played by the practical traineeship with regard to the possible modification or confirmation of perspectives and experiences related to the profession, about half of the participants (66.30%) report that the experience contributed to confirming their representations, beliefs and perspectives on teaching; while only 21.82% state that it modified their way of thinking and their experiences related to the profession (7.53%).

Data would seem to indicate that the experience in the school context would contribute little to modifying the students' ideologies, cultures, attitudes and experiences with reference to the profession, but rather to confirming well-structured representations that are evidently reflected in the working reality.

The data described are confirmed by the answers given by the participants to the question "Thinking back on your choice to undertake the LM-85 bis course of study, do you think the work placement helped you to ...". 94.75% of the participants stated that the experience helped to confirm their choices, while only 4.03% stated that they questioned them. A non-significant percentage (1.2%) stated that the apprenticeship did not have an orientation function on the training pathway. With regard to the effect that practical traineeship can have on the acquisition of greater awareness, the results of the analysis show that the process is more concerned with connecting theoretical and practical aspects (37.94%) and the discovery of one's own potential (23.32%). Non-significant percentages are recorded with reference to awareness of one's own limits (6.71%) and theoretical knowledge (6.34%).

4. Discussion

The scenario in which theoretical reflection and study are set is characterised by the need for an indispensable reformulation of initial teacher training courses,

starting from its epistemological premises and main problems. The commitment concerns all-rounded the identification of a precise cultural and professional profile of teachers that not only responds to a criterion of internal coherence, but is also concretely linked to real educational and didactic problems.

The exploratory study described takes the form of a monitoring activity of the traineeship programme and represents, thanks to the results that emerged, the starting point for a possible process of improvement of the initial training curriculum of pre-school and primary school teachers at the 'Mediterranea' University of Reggio Calabria. In this sense, the study was designed with the aim of re-qualifying the "pragmatic" dimension of the curriculum (apprenticeship), identifying the training elements to be reinforced, in view of the construction of professional identities and the critical issues to be addressed. The latter can be summarised through two main evidences that emerged from the exploratory study, which respectively concern:

- the impact of the tutor-trainee relationship on the student's perception of practical traineeship's training value and on professional learning;
- the imbalance of learning on the technical side of professionalism, rather than on the construction and development of professional identity;
- the discrepancy between "what is said about the school at university and the real school" (in other words, the misalignment between students' expectations deriving from university training and the reality of professional contexts and practices).

The most significant research data that the study brings out is the condition of 'fixation' of the majority of students in the process of prefiguring and building their identity: during the traineeship experience it would seem that representations or perspectives on teaching do not change, but on the contrary they would consolidate preconceived professional images.

From research results, the traineeship becomes a transformative experience exclusively to the extent that it allows you to "apply" previous knowledge and discover the link between theory and practice. It therefore does not present itself as a creative "exercise" to intercept what is not yet, as an opportunity to participate in the construction of a new work culture and to problematize professional experience, but rather as a space for the search for confirmations.

All these aspects are to be considered as an involutory trait of the professional's identity path. The training need that can be deduced and on which it is necessary to pay attention for the future can be linked to the trainee's ability to trace and

reconstruct the transformative/generative process within his own training history, which leads him to create a certain idea of self and of one's professional identity.

The potential that subjectivities can express in the construction of professional identity during traineeship would seem to remain in the dark, certainly because it requires more focused reflective work on the experience itself.

The pedagogical action that derives from these premises is substantiated in offering the trainee useful tools for an exercise in reflective thinking, about the constructive history of one's professional identity, within a critical management of the traineeship experience. It can represent an important transformative learning opportunity but, as emerged from the study, this would presuppose the active and conscious participation of the student in the construction of their own professional identity, through the questioning of the choices and representations of the teaching work.

Pedagogical research, engaged in the definition of a more adequate cultural profile of teachers, has long since pointed out the importance of considering the value of reflexivity, as well as of problematicity and intentionality, which qualify as determinants for the definition of an identity project; that related to pedagogical professionalism, in particular, is more strongly oriented by the need to articulate a theory on the subject before the professional object.

In conclusion, practice-focused educational activities such as the traineeship should be intentionally designed with the aim of integrating classroom learning with experience in the real work context - according to the WIL logic - especially paying attention to the delicate transition from prefiguration to assuming a real professional identity.

Participating in a working context can have a truly educational and guiding value only under one condition: the experience must necessarily be reworked and the knowledge/skills must be codified. Therefore, it becomes essential to plan and structure this experience in activities that can interest, intrigue and make the trainee reflect during the action. In this context, the role of the school mentor is central, whose primary function is to help the learner to become a builder and not a reproducer of meanings, an actor and not an implementer, a creator and not a performer.

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