

THE TRAINING OF THE SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR: AN OVERVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

In the European context, the training of socio-pedagogical professional educator is influenced by a holistic approach aiming to integrate social, cultural, and economic dimensions. The adoption of common standards at the European level contributes to ensuring coherence in skill acquisition. Training paths for professional educators in Europe are characterized by diversity, reflecting the variety of pedagogical, cultural, and social approaches present in different countries (Eurydice, 2019, 2023). The competencies to be trained are integrated into national or supranational educational frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2017), which not only emphasizes efforts towards European harmonization but also facilitates professional mobility within the European Union. Despite variations in the regulation of education professionals and the structure of training and specialization courses across countries, some common features underscore the importance of training these professionals. Specifically, there is a strong emphasis in Europe on social and pedagogical education, preparing educators to promote social inclusion, individual empowerment, and the adoption of effective pedagogical methodologies. The promotion of interculturality and the management of diversity are cross-cutting themes reflecting a strong commitment to building inclusive and pluralistic societies. In terms of curriculum design and development, learning outcomes are at the forefront of educational change (EQF, 2017). Ensuring the quality of university education shared among European countries also means supporting educators in training to achieve the expected competencies at the end of their higher education journey. The training of socio-pedagogical professional educators in Europe is a dynamic process that adapts to contemporary challenges and the evolving needs of society, contributing to shaping professionals capable of addressing complex challenges related to the promotion of well-being and the harmonious development of individuals (ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018). Its significance in creating an inclusive, innovative, and future-oriented educational environment is fundamental to social and cultural progress in Europe. Socio-pedagogical educators represent essential pillars in the construction of educated, resilient, and socially responsible communities. The objective of this contribution is to present a reflection on the profile of the socio-pedagogical professional educator in Italy and within the European framework, with a specific focus on the required competencies.

Keywords: *Socio-pedagogical professional educator, training paths, competencies, Italy and Europe.*

1. Introduction

The needs of contemporary society in the European context are becoming increasingly complex, and the actions taken by the European community reflect the construction of a network of professionals, especially in the field of education, working to provide targeted and higher-quality interventions (WHO, 2016). In this European policy context, the use of educational work becomes a natural and much-needed consequence. The social educator, in this sense, becomes the response to all the needs of societies that, although economically and culturally different, pursue the common goal: the construction of inclusive and just societies that value the individual and their development throughout the entire lifespan (ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018).

European interest in this role emerges precisely when the Community is concerned with the complexity of humanity and addresses the issue of the quality of life. The educator is the social operator who works with individuals and the entire social network around them, dealing with their growth and overcoming isolation and marginalization. The training of professional socio-pedagogical educators in Europe is a dynamic process that adapts to contemporary challenges and the changing needs of society, contributing to shaping professionals capable of addressing complex challenges related to the promotion of

well-being and harmonious development of individuals (Euridyce, 2019, 2023). Their importance in creating an inclusive, innovative, and future-oriented educational environment is fundamental to social and cultural progress in Europe. Socio-pedagogical educators represent essential pillars in the construction of educated, resilient, and socially responsible communities. Despite this fundamental agreement, the issues surrounding the recognition of the professional figure of the educator, the regulatory situation, intervention areas, and the type of training expected from these professionals reflect a highly diversified reality in Europe (Euridyce, 2019, 2023). This is why the role of the professional educator is constantly under discussion.

2. Socio-pedagogical professional educator in European context

Education professionals are a necessary component for building just and inclusive societies. Quality education is, consequently, the foundation for developing competent educators who, fortified by their specific knowledge of the education sector and practice-oriented competencies, address educational issues. Educational and training institutions have the task of training educators prepared to provide high-quality educational and training performances in order to meet the standards of their respective countries (WHO, 2016). Educational work is situated in contexts that present different and constantly evolving forms and problems. Competent educators must possess the tools to understand educational needs and use all information to design effective educational interventions with improvement in mind. In the Framework of Qualifications and Titles (2008), competence is defined as the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social, and methodological abilities to address work and study situations in the course of professional and personal development. Competence, therefore, becomes a tool for mobilizing resources, knowledge and competencies necessary to optimally respond to the demands that arise from the context and the individuals with whom the professional educator works.

Working in educational contexts means mobilizing an increasingly broad and complex set of competencies that must necessarily adapt to the flexible and dynamic contexts of educational work. But what are these competencies, and what is the qualification level for the professional educator in the European context? The necessary premise to make at this point is that these competencies are often integrated into national or supranational educational frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) or other specific documents in the educational sector, which vary depending on the region or country considered. This emphasizes how important it is to situate the competencies of education professionals and adapt them to the specific needs of each context or country.

In Europe, the EQF (2017) establishes a series of criteria based on the achievement of certain levels of learning with the aim of organizing and integrating qualifications and improving the levels of transparency, accessibility and quality of the education and training system in relation to the labor market. In this sense, learning outcomes highlight the coherence and objectives of the qualification and become the indicator to be considered for: designing curricula in formal learning contexts and creating non-formal learning pathways in the workplace. In terms of the European architecture of professions (EQF), the qualification of the socio-pedagogical professional educator ranks within level 6, which requires the professional to have an advanced degree of knowledge in the field of intervention, competencies in solving complex work problems, as well as a high degree of responsibility and autonomy in managing activities and projects, even in teams. The underlying principle of these directives is to ensure that every country in Europe can develop the most appropriate type of training for its cultural and social specificities, while ensuring a training and regulatory standard for professional accreditation that allows various European countries to recognize a competent and ethically defined professionalism.

How does all this translate in terms of required competencies for educators? Starting from the premise that social education is a profession based on the combination of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and personal commitment to collaborate in creating an inclusive society, the professional educator must necessarily continuously build and enhance a repertoire of fundamental and central competencies (AIEJI, 2005). From the Common Platform for Social Educators in Europe, fundamental competencies for addressing educational practice involve the ability to intervene and evaluate the educational situation and, in particular, the ability to reflect on educational issues aimed at guiding educational practice more effectively. Among the central competencies there are relational, communicative, organizational, systemic, and methodological skills. Therefore, educational work translates into a series of actions that require adequate and targeted professional competencies to achieve all the objectives of an educational intervention within a specific social and cultural context. It is precisely because of the characteristic of situated educational work that the training of educators is complex, as is the definition and recognition of their professionalism.

3. The case of Italy

In Italy, Law 205 of 2017 regulates the professional figure of the educator who operates in all socio-educational, socio-assistance, family support services, and minority group contexts, as well as in educational and school settings. The "Iori" law is effectively the regulatory recognition that governs education professions. Professional educators in Italy owe their qualification to the attainment of a degree in Educational Sciences and Training (L-19). It is for this reason that the recognition of the professional educator increases interest and attention to the training proposal and the definition of specific coherent initial training paths, aimed at favoring trajectories of professional development with a view to continuous improvement and enhancement of skills. The training offer must be organized to facilitate the translation of disciplinary content into usable knowledge in the professional world, respecting the educational pact, which is comprehensive, transparent, and shared (Boffo, 2021; Tammaro, Ferrantino & Iannotta, 2020).

The best way to promote the enhancement of skills is to conceive training experiences in theoretical-practical paths during which students can engage in reflective inquiry to enhance competencies and gain greater role awareness in educational practice (Chello et al., 2020). The professional identity of educators is built within training paths oriented towards the development and acquisition of indispensable competencies and knowledge to act within educational and training contexts (Cornacchia, Madriz, & Chianese, 2021). Training represents the cornerstone around which the professionalism of educators (Frison, 2020) and quality educational work (Rigamonti and Formenti, 2020) is defined. From these theoretical premises, the first study of the doctoral research project develops, which aims to investigate which competencies Italian Universities declare to train for professional educators in the initial training contexts of degree courses in Educational Sciences L-19.

To investigate the learning outcomes and competencies to be acquired at the end of the study path in Educational Sciences (L-19), the Annual Single Form (SUA) of 42 study courses were read and analyzed, excluding those with courses in distance learning mode. The SUA forms were downloaded in February 2023 from the portal of the Ministry of Universities and Research. Each SUA forms is structured according to tables containing management measures for the design, implementation, and self-assessment of degree courses. To examine the learning outcomes and competencies that universities intend to train for social educators, the tables referring to the training objectives of the courses were read. For the analysis of the final training objectives of the Annual Single Form, a qualitative approach with a bottom-up process was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gale et al., 2013). From reading of all the SUA forms, 4 main categories of knowledge and specific competencies for the profession were identified. The categories and subcategories were designed following a conservative principle whereby each category is unique, comprehensive, and based on specific criteria and descriptions (Batini et al., 2020). This initial process led to the construction of a model of categories, necessary for analyzing the SUA forms and providing final descriptive statistics on the occurrences of each category, and therefore of each identified competence, mentioned within the SUA forms. Below is the categorical model of the 4 groups of specific competencies and knowledge identified with detailed description.

Table 1. Model of competencies and knowledge categories identified in SUA form.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Description</i>
Knowledge and competences related to the educational area	Educators must acquire theoretical knowledge concerning the regulatory frameworks and the functioning of educational and training institutions, as well as psychopedagogical and related subjects, useful to guide educational practice and understand educational phenomena.
Organizational, methodological and didactic knowledge and competences	Educators must acquire methodological and didactic skills to be adapted to the educational and training needs and to the possible intervention strategies identified. In order to organize and manage the delivery of content, they must have adequate application skills of new digital instruments. The ability to design and evaluate an educational intervention cannot be separated from the acquisition of skills such as paying attention and observation, with the aim of identifying the educational problem and designing an intervention with adequate objectives. Practical skills relate to the ability to use educational research tools to empirically analyze educational situations, including through experimental surveys.

Communication competences	Communication skills for educators are essential to manage the organization and educational and formative activities using an appropriate and specialized language for communications with institutions and within teams. Communication skills are also indispensable for establishing interpersonal relationships that are functional to educational practice.
Competences of relationship and reflection	Educators work in contexts and situations of relationship, for this reason they must be able to read the affective-relational dynamics of individuals and groups to establish effective care relationships and intergroup ties, as well as being able to collaborate in multidisciplinary and interprofessional teams. Educators must be able to make a continuous reflective analysis of their work to improve educational practice and learn new skills. Specifically, it is required that they know how to manage independently and flexibly the problems and educational situations and to direct their training with the aim of developing professionalism.

The final analysis work allows us to understand how often the groups of specific competencies and knowledge identified are present in the SUA forms. In this way, a detailed overview of all the final learning objectives of the study courses in Educational Sciences (L-19) is produced for professional educators.

4. Final discussion

In Italy, there is a focus on providing an identity-forming education that trains competent and aware professional educators, while in the European context, there is an aim for greater recognition of the profession and optimization of competencies in terms of training objectives. This work must be attributed the importance it deserves, even just for the valuable roles and objectives it holds for the development of just and egalitarian societies. The training of socio-pedagogical educators' competencies in the European context should aim to meet current needs, but also to prepare education professionals to lead change and contribute to the construction of inclusive societies, respectful of diversity and oriented towards the well-being of all citizens. Reflecting on the skills necessary for educational practice is indicative to understand how to structure initial training paths and, above all, to provide useful guidance to orient the process of developing their own professionalism for educators in training and in service. Observing practices, noting the results achieved, reflecting on the strategies used, engaging with colleagues and other professionals, redesigning one's own action... these are all necessary actions to increase awareness, responsibility, and professional autonomy.

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