

## PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCIES AMONG IN-SERVICE SOCIO-PEDAGOGICAL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS: A NATIONWIDE EXPLORATORY SURVEY

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### Abstract

The definition of different professional roles and the competencies of professionals in educational care has been, and continues to be, a highly debated topic in the political, social, and academic realms on both national and international levels. The current socio-cultural context is marked by a proliferation of diverse and complex educational and training emergencies that encompass a wide range of special educational needs (ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018). The plurality of educational and training situations in the field requires functional pedagogical approaches and responses formulated through new knowledge, literacies, and competencies of educators (Gaspari, 2018) that adhere to the principles of inclusion and respect for diversity (UNESCO, 2009; ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018). Socio-pedagogical professional educators, in this sense, represent a necessary response to socio-cultural issues, and for this reason, a profound reflection on the role played by the essential set of competencies needed to address educational practice is essential (Sposetti et al., 2022; Boffo, 2021; Gaspari, 2018). Law No. 205 of 2017 establishes and defines the roles and functions of professional educators operating in socio-educational and training contexts. The direction set by the recognition of the professionalism and identity of socio-pedagogical educators brings to the forefront the issue of professional competencies that qualify educational and social interventions. The fields of intervention and educational design have highly complex and flexible characteristics, requiring competent professional figures attentive to the needs of the users. But what are the essential professional competencies for educational practice? And how do educators in service build their competencies? The exploratory investigation is aimed at socio-pedagogical professional educators in service throughout the national territory with the goal of exploring the theme of constructing professional profiles in real and diversified contexts. The study is formulated using mixed research methods and aims to understand which professional competencies educators recognize as fundamental for acting in socio-educational and training contexts, and to reflect on the formative experiences that contribute to the development of professionalism. The objective of this paper is to present the current state of research progress. In particular, will be presented the research design, the tools employed, and the initial results obtained, providing a comprehensive overview of the early stages of this study and anticipating the perspectives that emerge from analysis.

**Keywords:** *Socio-pedagogical professional educators, competencies, educational service, exploratory survey, national territory.*

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### 1. Introduction

The definition of professional roles and the necessary competencies for educational care professionals is a debated topic in various contexts, including political, social and academic, both nationally and internationally. Currently, society is marked by a range of complex and diverse educational and training emergencies involving a wide array of special educational needs (ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018). The diversity of situations in the sector requires pedagogical approaches that are functional and based on new knowledge, alphabets, and skills of educators (Gaspari, 2018), guided by principles of inclusion and respect for diversity (UNESCO, 2009; ONU, 2015; ISTAT, 2018). In this context, professional educators represent a necessary response to socio-cultural challenges, emphasizing the importance of a thorough reflection on the role they play and the indispensable competencies for addressing educational practice (Sposetti et al., 2022; Boffo, 2021; Gaspari, 2018). Improving and increasing the level of competencies to meet the new demands of the continuously and rapidly changing labor market and society is also the main objective of the Skills Pact of the European agenda for 2023. The European agenda for skills is a five-year plan aimed at developing and improving the skills of every citizen to adapt to the new structure of the labor market. The ongoing

transformations can be addressed through enhancing sustainable competitiveness, building strong resilience to react to crises, and ensuring greater social equity by achieving one of the European Pillar of Social Rights principles: access to education, training, and lifelong learning (European Commission, 2020). Regarding the Italian context, the first regulatory step defining the professional figure of educators is the Legislative Draft No. 2443, which clarifies the differences in terms of skills and intervention areas between socio-pedagogical educators and socio-health educators. The legislative process concludes with the recognition of the professionalism of socio-educational educators sanctioned by Law 205/17, where the educational and support professional operates within micro and macro social and educational contexts with the aim of ensuring full autonomy and citizenship rights in line with the inclusive perspective. The innovative aspect of the current regulations concerns the construction of professional identity with the goal of ending both the phase of weakness in the professional identity of educators and trainers and a series of role and competency ambiguities (Gaspari, 2018).

Professional educators operate in dynamic contexts that require attention to user needs, flexibility, mobility, uncertainty, and reflexivity (Buccolo, 2022), encapsulated in what Schön (1993) defines as artistic ability. Building an adequate set of theoretical and practical skills and knowledge becomes crucial for the affirmation of professional profiles that, to meet educational needs, must necessarily develop strong, flexible, and functional skills for the care and support of individual users and the social network of the territory in which they operate (Boffo, 2021; Gaspari, 2018). In light of Law 205/17, the reflection on how to train education professionals capable of addressing educational practice becomes an opportunity to redefine the profile of professional educators (Gaspari, 2018). Educational work represents a fundamental training experience that continually modifies the protagonists of the educational encounter (Fadda, 2016). Specifically, professional educators consolidate their skills in a more articulated and complex manner, integrating knowledge from a specific sector or topic with the best educational design strategies they experience (Sposetti et al., 2022). In this way, experienced educators become reflective actors involved in a continuous training process through reflection on educational practice (Schön, 2017). Adopting a reflective and design-oriented attitude in the educational field is essential to "avoid falling into pre-packaged, modular-standardized, and reductionist didactic solutions in relation to the complexity of the individual" (Gaspari, 2018, p. 32).

## **2. Research questions, objectives and methodology**

The definition and construction of a solid professionalism for the application of knowledge and skills materialize within initial training paths to be planned with the perspective of achieving high levels of effective and quality training (Rossini, 2020). Universities bear full responsibility for training education professionals by organizing training programs according to the formative needs of professional educators already operating in real contexts, dealing with a diverse multitude of different and continuously evolving needs (Sposetti et al., 2022; Fioretti, 2022; Boffo, 2021; Biasin et al., 2020;). Reflecting on aspects related to the educational offerings to build the skills of professional educators within initial training paths is a crucial topic to discuss (Sposetti et al., 2022; Fioretti, 2022; Boffo, 2021), but it becomes even more necessary to establish a direct connection with the real contexts of educational work to design coherent training paths (European Commission, 2020, 2016). In this perspective, the research design arises from the following questions: What are the essential professional competencies for educational practice among professional educators? And how do educators in service build their competencies? To attempt to provide answers to the questions that have given rise to the project, it is appropriate to collect perceptions and viewpoints from educators in service. The specific objective of the project is to identify the ways in which educators develop their professionalism, the competencies they use, and consider fundamental to address educational and formative demands, based on their reflections on training and professional practice experiences.

At the current state, the research instrument has been developed, which will be administered to educators with at least 2 years of service in the Italian national territory. The questionnaire is formulated with the aim of exploring and capturing descriptive statistics on the competencies considered essential in educational practice, the level and type of initial training and, finally, allowing the recipients to self-assess the technical, organizational, relational, and reflective skills learned and consolidated during their professional experience. In addition to the demographic section, the instrument comprises 6 other sections that will investigate: the type of service in which educators operate, the type and level of pre-service and in-service training, the perception of skills necessary for professional practice, the self-assessment of skills that universities declare to provide training for educators, and concluding reflections on perceived training needs.

### 3. Discussions

The debate on the construction of professional profiles for educators in initial training paths represents a critical element for achieving a clear professional identity. Training plans have highly varied structures and objectives (Perillo, 2023), and it is necessary to start with the construction of initial training paths based on the educational practice of educators who are already working in real contexts. Universities and the workplace must converge in a common path to train professionals capable of facing the practice in educational services and ready to handle educational and formative issues (Boffo, 2021; Rossini, 2020). Establishing a coherent connection between the fields of educational intervention and training proposals becomes a priority (Perillo, 2023; Sposetti et al., 2022; Boffo, 2021; Rossini, 2020).

While it is true that the set of knowledge and methods of practices are transmitted in initial training paths, it is equally true that the situated experience of educators in service consolidates the connections between knowledge and skills and allows for the construction of new ones (Perillo, 2023; Sposetti et al., 2022). Understanding the modes of learning and skill consolidation and how the professionalism of educators develops in a service is a starting point for considering the application and investment of increasingly effective methodologies and teaching strategies for the training of competent professionals (Boffo, 2021). This is why the proposed research project can contribute to defining initial training paths coherent with educational practice: through listening to real experiences of professional educators in service, it is possible to open a privileged channel to the world of academic knowledge and that expressed in practice (Perillo, 2023).

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