HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL EDUCATORS IN ITALY: THE IMPACT OF THE INITIAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE ON COMPETENCIES DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The world of educational professions is re-reading and reforming skills effectively and functionally to solve increasingly complex educational and training problems and respond to targeted quality interventions. Today, education has a fundamental and powerful meaning since it directly responds to resolving social issues through educational action. In the European community scenario, education professionals are necessary to promote individuals' well-being and harmonious development. In Italy, with L. 205/2017 and L. 55/2024 recognizing the profession and establishing a professional order, it shed light on training professionals to deal with educational practice. The reflection on the design of training provision to develop the competencies of professional educators within initial training paths is a crucial topic that requires careful discussion. What is the real impact of university training experience for professional educators serving in the national territory? This question is the base for the project which plans to investigate how much initial training courses contribute to forming competent and effective professional social educators. The final research object is to explore mixed survey processes that provide for administering a questionnaire to professional social educators serving in the national territory. The contribution aims to provide an overview of the results obtained from the survey conducted and to bring out the opinions and perspectives of educators.

Keywords: Educational needs, social educators, training paths, professional competencies.

1. Introduction

The modernity of our time is marked by numerous changes that bring with them a series of complex and varied socio-educational problems and emergencies (ONU, 2015). Consequently, the field of educational professions is re-examining and reformulating competencies effectively and functionally to address educational and training issues (Gaspari, 2018), responding with targeted and increasingly high-quality interventions (WHO, 2016). Today, education holds a fundamental and powerful meaning as it represents a direct response to resolving social issues through educational action, even within the European community where education professionals play a necessary role in promoting the well-being and harmonious development of individuals (Euridyce, 2023; 2019). Therefore, professional educators are key players in implementing educational practices that address the complexity and challenges of the system (Gaspari, 2018). With Law 205 of 2017 and Law 55/2024, the professional educator obtains normative recognition regarding the profession and qualification, shedding light on the issue of training professionals capable of addressing educational practice (Gaspari, 2018). The definition and development of solid professionalism, functional to applying knowledge and competencies, are achieved through targeted and planned initial training pathways to ensure high standards of practical and quality training (Rossini, 2020). Universities have the full responsibility to train education professionals, adapting training pathways to the needs of real contexts (European Commission, 2020), allowing future professionals to develop skills and knowledge suitable for addressing the wide range of evolving and growing educational and training needs (Sposetti et al., 2022; Boffo, 2021; Biasin et al., 2020;). Reflection on the design of educational offerings to develop the skills of professional educators within initial training pathways is a crucial topic that requires careful discussion. But what is the real impact of the university training experience for professional educators in service throughout the national territory? It is from this question that the project takes shape, aiming to investigate how initial training pathways contribute to the formation of competent and effective professional educators.

2. Design, methods and objectives of research

The reflection on how to build the professional competencies of educators within initial training pathways is a central theme in the academic debate (Sposetti et al., 2022; Fioretti, 2022; Boffo, 2021). However, it is increasingly urgent to strengthen the connection between academic training and the real contexts of educational work in order to design coherent and meaningful learning experiences (European Commission, 2016; 2020). In this framework, the research project is guided by key questions: What competencies are essential for professional practice in education today? How do these competencies develop through work experience? The main objective is to investigate how in-service educators develop their professional identity, which competencies they use and consider essential, and how their training and professional practice have contributed to shaping their expertise (Rionero et al., 2024). The exploratory study follows a mixed-methods approach and is organized into five phases. The first phase involves the construction of a questionnaire divided into four sections. The tool includes both closed and open-ended questions and aims to collect descriptive data on competencies considered essential for practice, the level and type of initial and ongoing training received, and to promote self-assessment of technical, organizational, relational, and reflective competencies acquired and consolidated through professional experience. The second phase consists of submitting the research protocol to the CERT ethics committee of Sapienza, University of Rome for approval. Before full deployment, the questionnaire will undergo a try-out phase to assess the effectiveness of the items. In the third phase, the questionnaire will be distributed online via Google Forms to a national sample of in-service educators, selected using snowball sampling. Finally, the fourth phase focuses on data analysis using mixed methods: descriptive statistics for the closed questions and qualitative analysis for open-ended responses. The latter will follow a bottom-up, evidence-based coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gale et al., 2013), aimed at identifying recurring patterns and shared meanings supported by statistical analysis software.

3. Results

The questionnaire was administered to a random sample using the snowball method and reached 324 socio-pedagogical professional educators operating nationwide, all of whom have been working in the field for over five years. The sample consists predominantly of female professionals (91.7%) with an average age of 38 years. The three most represented regions are Lombardy (22%), Lazio (13.3%), and Sardinia (12%). The socio-pedagogical educators who responded to the questionnaire are primarily employed in private services (70.7%), such as nursery schools (28.7%), educational support in schools (16%), day centers for individuals with psycho-physical disabilities (9.1%), 0–6 educational services (6.8%), or other types of services (39.4%). Of the total (324 persons), 35.5% hold a degree in Education Sciences (L-19), qualifying them as socio-psycho-pedagogical educators, while 17.6% have obtained a Master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences (LM-85). Among the 324 respondents, 173 professionals continued to complete the section of the questionnaire dedicated to pre-service university training. Of these, 40.5% reported that the knowledge and skills acquired during academic training were "fairly useful," identifying the internship experience as the most formative activity (79.2%) due to its experiential nature and the opportunity for reflective practice on theoretical content. Regarding in-service training, 34.6% of the total sample reported not being involved in any continuing education or professional development programs. Nonetheless, 87% of respondents expressed a need to acquire further tools and knowledge to enhance their educational practice. Frequently mentioned topics include psychological aspects related to the functional psycho-physical development of children and parental support, emotional regulation, and educational planning in complex contexts.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the quantitative data, briefly presented here, together with the ongoing qualitative investigation, clearly highlights a strong and shared demand from socio-pedagogical educators to revise university degree programs in order to foster a more effective connection with the concrete realities of educational work. Alongside this need is a growing awareness of the importance of in-service training, recognized as a key resource for updating and improving educational practices, although it remains insufficiently widespread across educational services. It is within this context that the proposed research project is situated, aiming to support the development of both initial and in-service training programs that are more closely aligned with real-world educational practice.

The perceived gap between academic training and the complexity of professional contexts calls for a deep rethinking of how training pathways are designed. While the transmission of pedagogical knowledge and approaches during university education is undoubtedly essential, it is not sufficient: it is the

concrete experience in educational settings, with their daily challenges, that gives meaning and substance to this knowledge, transforming it into live, actionable competence (Perillo, 2023; Sposetti et al., 2022). In this light, listening to the experiences of in-service educators becomes a privileged channel for building a meaningful bridge between theoretical and practical knowledge (Rionero et al., 2024).

Universities and the field of educational work are therefore called upon to engage in a shared effort to prepare professionals capable of navigating complex situations and promoting the well-being of the individuals they work with (Boffo, 2021; Rossini, 2020). Designing training paths that are coherent with the actual needs of educational services has become an urgent priority (Perillo, 2023). From this perspective, situated practices and reflective experience play a central role in the development of innovative teaching methodologies that can support the continuous and dynamic growth of professional competence.

Rethinking both initial and continuing education in light of real practices and professional experiences means not only responding to a call for coherence and quality but also actively contributing to the construction of a shared and recognized professional identity over time.

Acknowledgments

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