

## THE INITIAL TRAINING OF TEACHERS

### LA FORMAZIONE INIZIALE DEGLI INSEGNANTI

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#### Abstract

With this contribution we intend to report on the activities carried out at the University of Cassino regarding the training courses for the acquisition of the 24 university credits. In particular, we want to highlight the positive aspects of this experience that involved a considerable number of students starting from the first edition of 2017 until that of 2019 for a total of 5 cycles delivered in presence and the subsequent editions carried out remotely due to COVID-19. The training activities organized in presence were also carried out with the support of an online area exclusively dedicated to these paths. With COVID-19, face-to-face training activities have been replaced with remote lessons in synchronous mode. Despite the commitment required for attendance both first in presence in the classroom and then through the synchronous connection remotely, the participation to the lessons was very wide and of great level of interest considering that many members came from technical-scientific study paths. All the topics covered in the lessons of the different modules with particular regard to the methodological-didactic ones were of great interest.

Contrary to the cliché that 24 university credits are seen as a simple “purchase of credits”, in our experience it can be, instead, considered as a great training opportunity and an added value for the construction of the professionalism of the teacher. Particular attention should also be paid to the digital skills that should be acquired through these pathways.

Con questo contributo intendiamo riferire sulle attività svolte presso l'Università degli Studi di Cassino in merito ai corsi di formazione per l'acquisizione dei 24 crediti formativi. In particolare, vogliamo evidenziare gli aspetti positivi di questa esperienza che ha coinvolto un numero considerevole di studenti a partire dalla prima edizione del 2017 fino a quella del 2019 per un totale di 5 cicli consegnati in presenza e le successive edizioni svolte a distanza a causa del COVID-19. Le attività formative organizzate in presenza sono state svolte anche con il supporto di un'area online dedicata esclusivamente a questi percorsi. Con COVID-19, le attività di formazione faccia a faccia sono state sostituite con lezioni a distanza in modalità sincrona. Nonostante l'impegno richiesto per la frequenza sia prima in presenza in aula che poi attraverso la connessione sincrona da remoto, la partecipazione alle lezioni è stata molto ampia e di grande interesse considerando che molti iscritti provenivano da percorsi di studio tecnico-scientifici. Di grande interesse sono stati tutti gli argomenti trattati nelle lezioni dei diversi moduli con particolare riguardo a quelli metodologico-didattici.

Contrariamente al cliché che 24 crediti universitari siano visti come un semplice "acquisto di crediti", nella nostra esperienza può essere, invece, considerato come una grande opportunità formativa e un valore aggiunto per la costruzione della professionalità del docente. Particolare attenzione dovrebbe essere prestata anche alle competenze digitali che dovrebbero essere acquisite attraverso questi percorsi.

#### Keywords

Teaching methodologies, Teaching professionalism, Evaluation, Teacher training, Digital teaching skills.

Metodologie didattiche, Professionalità didattica, Valutazione, Formazione docenti, Competenze didattiche digitali.

### **Initial teacher education and recruitment**

The issue of initial teacher education has had over time different approaches and visions that have significantly influenced the configuration and perception of the teaching profession not only in the school context but also in society at large.

In this connection it may be useful to make a brief historical summary starting from the Gentile question concerning precisely the initial training of the teacher. Gentile, in fact, affirmed that if the teachers were mediocre, it was not due to being "too learned or impractical, but because they were little learned and too practical". A few years later, in 1932 he affirmed, in fact, that "the professional preparation of teachers is not that attested by diplomas with a stamp: you need to invest in yourself with a personal job, together with the formation of one's own culture. One is a consequence of the other." Or even that it is not possible to teach future teachers "what cannot be taught", what is "the spontaneous art of our hearts as educators, the genius of man who comes into contact with minors, who together with them sets out for the ascent of life and spirit!".

Moreover, Gentile starting from the assumption that that of the teacher is an intellectual profession, which could not be "learned", but simply "known", for this reason it was necessary to introduce in the Universities a professional qualification exam distinct from the degree one that will be the condition, to verify the disciplinary knowledge of future teachers (Magni, 2019).

After the end of their studies, aspiring teachers had to take a competition based exclusively on disciplinary knowledge, divided into 19 distinct subjects (which today would correspond to the much more numerous "competition classes").

After passing the competition and after the three years of probation, the teacher passed into the roles of the State as an extraordinary teacher: their legal status was governed by the R.D. n. 2367 of 27 November 1924, "General Regulation on the legal status of principals, professors and assistant, secretarial and subordinate staff", which included – for the first time in a clear way – the teachers among the civil servants of the State. It is no coincidence, in fact, that all the teaching staff of schools of all levels, including universities, were required to take an oath of allegiance to the State and to the Royal House.

The events related to the initial training and recruitment of teachers sees in the following period the replication of a scheme based on rule-derogation-exception. We can cite seasons that have seen the massive use of special qualification courses, ordinary and extraordinary competitions with times not always certain for their performance, the establishment of rankings, for precarious workers, in different bands depending on the titles and service including the so-called exhaustion rankings.

The initial training of teachers is part of the competences of the University with the university reform of 1990 where the Schools for Specialization in Secondary Education (SSIS) are introduced, two-year and enabling postgraduate courses, organized by the universities even if these paths were activated only almost a decade after their formal elaboration in the 1999/2000 academic year.

The SSIS articulated their training curriculum in four areas and ended with a final exam for the achievement of the diploma having the value of both a "State exam" enabling teaching, and as a title of admission to competitions for teaching places in secondary schools (art. 4 Law no. 341/1990).

During this decade, therefore, an attempt is made to "progressively transfer to universities the task of providing for the training (and consequent recruitment) of secondary school teachers. (...) This method of training, initially accompanied by the persistence of recruitment through the passing of competitions, should have progressively represented the ordinary channel of access to the teaching profession. ”

At the same time as the start of the first cycle of the SSIS, Law no. 124 of 3 May 1999 (Urgent provisions on school staff) provided again, alongside the merit rankings of the competitions, for the return of the permanent rankings, organized on a provincial basis and divided into bands, for the purpose of conferring annual substitutions as well as recruitment in a permanent role.

With the D.M. n. 249/2010 ends the experience of the SSIS with the delineation of two types of training courses for teaching:

a) for teaching in kindergarten and primary school a five-year master's degree course, a single cycle in derogation from the provisions of art. 8, paragraph 2, of Legislative M Decree no. 270 of 22 October 2004 of the MIUR, including an internship to be started from the second year of the course;

b) for teaching in the first and second grade secondary school, a two-year master's degree course with scheduled limited access, followed by a further year of training called TFA (Active Training Internship).

Pending the entry into force of the new two-year master's degree courses and the consequent "ordinary" TFA, the transitional regime has seen the creation of two cycles of "transitional" TFA, and an exceptional reserved path (Special Enabling Paths), reserved for temporary teachers with at least three years of service.

Finally, with Law 107/2015, a new system of initial training and recruitment of teachers in the school was outlined, subsequently revised and amended which, at the moment, provides for the achievement of 24 credits in the anthropo-psychopedagogical disciplines and in those concerning teaching methodologies and technologies as well as the competition to access the roles.

The specialization course for educational support in the school as outlined in Ministerial Decree 249/2010 has remained substantially the same.

Through this summary reconstruction it is evident that the initial training of both disciplinary and supportive teachers sees its configuration rooted within the university.

### **The importance of teacher training**

A better quality of school education depends on many factors, but it is clear that it depends first and foremost on improving teacher recruitment and training systems. The administrations of those European states that in recent years have activated more or less radical reforms of the education system are well aware of this: everywhere teacher training has been the key to the effectiveness of every reform. On the contrary, it is a widely shared opinion that every school reform, before being retouched of structures or updating of programs or replacement of methods, is essentially reform of the teacher, that is, skills, social enhancement of his role, without forgetting in the premise the necessary and pertinent motivations to be put at the base of the educational commitment of teaching (Mortari, 2011).

In recent years, moreover, the global and European dimension of the education systems and educational policies put in place by individual states is increasing more and more: it is certainly no coincidence that more and more often we refer to a single European Education Area through terms such as European Education *Space* (EES) and European Education *Policy* (EEP).

Certainly, the evolution of the European Union's policies in the field of education has followed a slow and often not too linear path: for over 20 years the word "*education*" has remained a "taboo" at Community level.

It was in the first half of the seventies that education entered the European debate: in 1971, for the first time, the ministers of education of the various member states met together in Brussels; but only in the mid-eighties that the European dimension of education policies could be considered to have begun.

The emergence of a European dimension of education policies has also contributed to the management of school staff, which also takes into account the budgets of each individual Member State; in fact, as the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) pointed out in one of its latest annual reports *Education at a Glance*, "while savings can be made by cutting some capital expenditures (such as not building new schools) and other current expenditures (such as not buying certain types of teaching materials), when pressure increases on the budget item dedicated to education, changes in staff spending have the greatest impact on overall spending. Of course, the savings achieved by reducing wages or by reducing the number of teachers and the rest of the staff is perhaps counterproductive, as it discourages good teachers from

entering or remaining in the profession. It is a fact that, in addition to managing resources more efficiently, it is essential to improve human resource management to improve the quality of education systems.”

Demographic ageing is now a general factor among the countries of the European Union: this phenomenon is particularly acute in the case of teachers. Some Member States will have to recruit a large number of new teachers to make up for the gap left by the large amount of retirements. In Sweden, Germany and Italy, for example, about 50% of teaching staff in schools are over 50 years old.

Precisely on the basis of these data, the European Commission itself, in its 2020 annual monitoring document on the state of education and training systems in Europe, said that "rethinking how we can attract, train and support teachers and school leaders is an urgent matter".

With regard to policies on teaching staff, it should be remembered from the outset that many European countries are facing different and demanding challenges: from the lack of qualified teachers, to the low social prestige enjoyed by the teaching profession, to the growing demand for better working conditions. These factors make it increasingly difficult to attract and retain the best recent graduates in teaching.

In addition, it should be borne in mind that the teaching staff is among the most important factors within the school that influences the results of the students, focusing on them means wanting to achieve the greatest results in terms of efficiency of educational systems. In order to attract, train and recruit high-quality teachers, it is crucial to ensure a consistent supply, which includes a high-quality system of initial teacher training, systematic support for new teachers and, in the long term, personalized professional development paths.

For these reasons, teachers' policies have become a top priority in Europe (Baldacci, 2013).

In this regard, in fact, it is enough to review the numerous concluding documents of the meetings of the European Council in recent years to realize how, even in the most specific dress of policies for the training and recruitment of teachers, the voice of the European Union has become increasingly stronger: for example, in the objectives established by the work program "Education & Training 2010" it was emphasized that "the possibility of attracting and retaining staff adequately qualified and motivated in the teaching staff, it faces serious recruitment difficulties due to the ageing of the teaching staff itself" and for this very reason this area is even more "a short- and medium-term priority in most European countries".

Subsequently, further documents were adopted by the European Council, increasingly focused on initial training and on how to recruit teachers.

Particularly relevant are the 2016 European Council Conclusions on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, where it is recognized that "the knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers are the most important factors in achieving high-quality learning outcomes".

For this reason, it is essential not only to ensure that those who hold a position as a teacher or head teacher are of an excellent standard and suitable for the tasks to be performed, but also to provide for initial training and continuous professional development of the highest level for teaching staff of all levels.

### **A specific training course for future teachers**

The importance of a specific training course for future teachers is felt today more than ever as an urgency, also in light of the new needs dictated by the pandemic. At a time when the university path is often lacking compared to a professional start-up of students that is consistent with their curriculum, the knowledge of teaching models, methodologies and support structures becomes fundamental for the training of the professional figure of the teacher. This is enough to understand how the question cannot and should not end in the concept of "training credit". The fact that there is a real need for training is also shown by the numbers of attendance at the courses activated for the acquisition of the so-called 24 CFU (university credits) in the University of Cassino, which, at the issuance of Ministerial Decree no. 616 of 10 August 2017, promptly responded by establishing the first cycle of the 24creditstraining course in 2017, counting more than 1200 students

from different regions and universities of Italy. This first edition was followed by several others with the participation of over three thousand students.

One of the reasons for the success of the various cycles activated by the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio was the clear and effective design of the training course, starting from the creation of a dedicated online area, with the support of a platform for managing and sharing teaching material and various communications, up to the packaging of a complete training offer that would cover the scientific-disciplinary sectors related to anthropology (M-DEA/01), pedagogy (M-PED/01 and M-PED03), psychology (M-PSI/01) and teaching methodologies and technologies (M-PED/04).

### **Peculiarities and implementation of activities**

In translating the scientific nature of the models into teaching methodologies applicable in the field of education and training at school, a fundamental role has been played by the choice of face-to-face teaching: the direct involvement of the audience activates personal interest, encourages participation, increases curiosity. Especially in the current historical moment, in which face-to-face teaching has been replaced by virtual classrooms, it is even more evident that such a training course provided for by current legal provisions, is also fundamental for a correct methodological and pedagogical approach of online lessons. Being able to acquire a basic preparation on the disciplines characterizing the professionalism of the teacher at all levels of education, the future teacher will find more easily the communicative-relational dynamics that require, as in the case of online teaching, also the knowledge and mastery of new methods and new means of teaching delivery. Each lesson, pedagogically speaking, goes beyond the simple transmission of disciplinary knowledge. Each meeting, in fact, activates a relationship of teacher-student reciprocity: the teacher, when transmitting disciplinary knowledge, also receives non-verbal messages from the students at the same time, through body language (Mari, 2019). While this type of interaction was possible with the physical presence in the classroom, with the remote mode interactions took on a different form, thanks to the technical functionality of the Meet classroom, the students were able to interact more easily with the teachers through questions and case proposals. All this has helped the teacher to use technological solutions of communicative mediation for educational purposes, to prepare interactive forms of student involvement to also allow a verification of the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. As a matter of fact, for most of the students who had never had contact with the anthropo-socio-pedagogical disciplines, the first approach to them was fundamental: doing it correctly meant providing not only the right knowledge in terms of content, but also the right interpretative tools, so that these could be a real professionalizing support in view of the future role as teacher and not just simple disciplines to study.

The lessons, divided into four modules and held by qualified professors of the University of Cassino, saw the numerous participation of students from different study paths, in particular from the technical-scientific and legal area, with previous and diversified work experience, recent graduates looking for tools to face the world of work and graduates often coming from short periods of substitution in schools, disoriented by the continuous succession of norms that regularize the qualification path to the profession of the teacher. The students' assiduity and interest in the courses activated has shown that the acquisition of the 24 credits should not be reduced to the idea of simply obtaining a pass for the final exam, but should be a moment of real training, an opportunity to acquire those knowledge and skills that almost always go beyond the educational programs of university courses, revealing a shared need that is to integrate one's own course of study with a training process aimed at school. This need involved not only the humanities and the social sciences sectors, oriented by nature and vocation to the educational outlet, but also a considerable number of students from the legal area (about 15% of the participants), from the technical-scientific area (about 14%) and from the economic one (12%), a symptom of a renewed interest in the school sector and a strong demand for training at the didactic level, represented, in this case, by the PF24 which constitutes a first preparatory segment, in view of access to the qualification path to the profession. The numerical data acquired have therefore made it possible to find a strong participation of the non-humanistic sector for which PF24 has constituted a first and essential

basis for training and definition of the teacher's profile, offering the acquisition of different types of skills, in particular methodological and pedagogical ones for the future planning and management of curricular actions.

Thus, the cliché that saw this training course as a bureaucratic procedure to be fulfilled, has been replaced by the experience of a constructive path at several levels, personal and professional, a guarantee of a more complete, useful and expendable individual preparation also at the competitive level. Face-to-face lessons have ensured more immediate accessibility to complex topics such as school regulations and the diversification of teaching methodologies and technologies, as well as the awareness that the acquisition of knowledge and teaching tools must be considered hand in hand with the innovation of school models.

In the case of the courses held at the University of Cassino, in addition to the interest in the specific contents of the individual disciplines, it was possible to find the organizational effectiveness of the courses and individual lessons, starting from the timetable, designed to enable the presence in the classroom of workers, spaces which guaranteed the management of the large number of participants, of the computer supports to the lessons (such as slides, PowerPoint, audio and video documents) and individual study aids made readily available on the online platform that can be consulted by all students enrolled in the course. The particular attention to the plurality of the realities constituting the student body, which was proven by the clarity and effectiveness of the lessons, facilitated and encouraged the participation of the students. The opportunity for clarification interventions by the audience, dialogue with the teachers and cooperation between the members are the further results of a winning strategy in the structuring and management methods of this training course: they have proven to be indispensable for newcomers to the disciplines covered by the 24 university credits training course. The availability of the teachers to listen to the students then allowed a constant, constructive, and stimulating dialogue to deepen the topics covered, which allowed to achieve a more complete and conscious preparation also in view of the final exams. The latter, given the numerous participations of students in the courses, were carried out in written mode, with multiple choice questionnaires, administered first in paper form, then in telematic form.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the entire course was a positive experience not only on the level of cultural and professional training, but also on the social and relational level, essential to face the competition first and the classroom after. The balance of adhesions and attendance in the classroom has given a more than positive feedback of the interest that the school sector has aroused and arouses also in those who have completed a course of study different from the humanistic and pedagogical one. The high number of students who attended the lessons with constancy and punctuality has shown that the students, in addition to acquiring the training credits required by law to participate in the various competitions, felt the need also, and perhaps above all, for an effective and adequate preparation to face not only the competition tests, but also the future work commitments in the field of education. The seriousness of the formative relationship between teachers and students has proved to be very effective and fruitful. Overall, the need and importance of a real definition of the profile of the teacher in his training and educational task emerged, in compliance with the indications of Legislative Decree no. 59 of 13 April 2017 (art. 5 paragraph 4) relating to the "Reorganization, adaptation and simplification of the initial training system and access to the roles of teacher in secondary school to make it functional to the social and cultural enhancement of the profession, pursuant to Article 1, paragraphs 180 and 181, letter b), of Law 13 July 2015 no 107". Creating and/or strengthening skills in the field of education and training sciences has proved indispensable to be able to interpret educational issues and the dynamics of school teaching, to manage the design and implementation of appropriate curricular models and to cooperate in inclusion processes.

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