

Role and competences of the socio-pedagogical professional educator.

The contribution of experimental pedagogy

Ruolo e competenze dell'educatore professionale socio-pedagogico. Il contributo della pedagogia sperimentale

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abstract

In the presence of widespread and significant individual and social discomfort phenomena registered in today's complex society, the recent pedagogical debate has been focusing on awareness of the importance of recognition and of the work of new educational professions attributable to non-formal education. This article proposes a reflection on the role and competences of the socio-pedagogical professional educator (also in light of the law No. 2656 of June 21, 2016) and his areas of intervention. After analyzing desirable training paths, the article clearly explains the contribution given from experimental pedagogy to the construction of educational professions.

Keywords: *competences, role, educational professions*

In presenza di diffusi e significativi fenomeni di disagio individuale e sociale registrati nell'attuale società complessa il dibattito pedagogico recente è stato incentrato sulla consapevolezza dell'importanza del riconoscimento e del lavoro delle nuove professioni educative ascrivibili all'educazione non formale. Il presente articolo propone una riflessione sul ruolo e sulle competenze dell'educatore professionale socio-pedagogico (anche alla luce della legge 2656 del 21 Giugno del 2016). Dopo un'analisi dei percorsi formativi auspicabili l'articolo esplicita il contributo fornito dalla pedagogia sperimentale nella costruzione delle professionalità educative.

Parole chiave: competenze, ruoli, professioni educative

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Introduction

We can never consider professionalism simply as the outcome or the product of a training path, which has its own definite conclusion (Frabboni, Guerra, Scurati, 2005). Professionalism is a dynamic dimension having its foundation in a targeted training process that continues to grow and evolve. On the contrary, a profession would merely become a craft in a technical and repetitive sense.

The possession of knowledge and specific skills characterizes the dimensions of professional training and its founding elements. Such education consists of four levels: general culture, psycho-social-pedagogical skills, competences toward particular sectors, and skills related to investigation, observation and research. In other words, this is a kind of training qualified by various forms of knowledge at different levels of mastery, not determined once for all, but with possible steps and insights acquired over the course of one's professional life.

We can see that in past decades teachers and pedagogists have been working in constantly changing conditions. Think about relational contexts where families and other educational institutions often proceed with different styles and reasons: we refer to rapid cultural processes, higher density of information, increasing number of basic needed alphabets, motivational levels not very high among young people, message fragmentation and versatility of behavioral patterns. A defined, mature and recognizable professionalism is necessary to hack into these realities (Santelli, 2011). Educational relationships have high levels of difficulty and that is the reason why they require refined, elaborated and in depth competences, which reflect an expert knowledge regarding possibilities, circumstances, training outcomes resulting from events and from social and cultural conditions, as well as a good personal balance (Gardella, 2016).

The dimension of the research (and hence the importance of the contribution coming from experimental pedagogy) highlights the need for the

educator to set his presence, in his environment, in terms of activity, proactivity and innovation (Paparella, 1997). We can see very clearly the disciplinary re-foundation of pedagogy and of professions based on it, in studies, research and educational practices that during the twentieth century were already stating internationally and nationally. They make up the world heritage of schools and scholars of pedagogy, not only within University (Ulivieri, 2017). They had a difficult start. However, thanks to research and category associations they continue working along with other professionals of the field for the qualification and recognition of the professional chain of full education (the professional educator of the CI L19 and the professional health educator of the CI L/SNT/2).

Today in educational professions there are graduates who come from two faculties (Educational and Medical Sciences), but there are also undergraduate or untitled individuals working since decades because at the time when they were hired it was not requested a specific title. There is no way improvise educators. The law in this field is complex and its review waited for more than 20 years. The recent approval of the text “Discipline of professions of socio-pedagogical professional educator, social and health professional educator and pedagogist” (Law 2656) finally acknowledges the importance of education in taking care of the individual’s development and the fact that people with a specific competence should carry out this function, thanks to a specific professional culture (Colombo, Cocever, Bianchi, 2004).

In fact, article 2 of the above-mentioned law, starts the definition of professions of socio-pedagogical professional educator and pedagogist – both characterized by scientific autonomy and ethical responsibility –, particularly specifying that the pedagogist is an apical level professional. Both these professionals work in the formal and non-formal educational field, under self-employment, as employed or, where possible, through partnerships, carrying out interventions in different educational and formative contexts for individuals and groups (of all ages), as well as teaching, researching and experimentation activity. We are going to define three different professions along with their respective competences and scopes: socio-pedagogical professional educator, social and health professional educator and pedagogist. Therefore, from now on instead of current “educators” (those coming from faculties of Education and Training Sciences) and “professional educators” (those coming from courses linked to the Faculty of Medicine) we will have the socio-pedagogical professional educator (qualification with the diploma of Education and Training Sciences) and the social and health professional educator (enabling a degree diploma of health professions for rehabilitation).

The one in place is a major challenge for our undergraduate courses. S. Ulivieri clearly explains this when says that

“the University education of three cycles in various areas and levels of knowledge and skills related to pedagogical research of departments and to the world of work through orientation services, internships and Job Placement, will be able to make necessary adjustments to profiles and curricula, as well as to guarantee pertinent qualifications to provide services and improve educational actions” (Ulivieri, 2017, p. 12).

1. The role of the socio-pedagogical professional educator: which training paths?

For a long time there has not been a legal or legislative definition concerning the professional profile, the functions and the working environment for all those who, outside the health field, performed educational non-formal activities. At a work placement level, this led to a difference between those who were entering the world of work coming from the different training courses currently available (Zaniello, 2009). Whereas a sufficiently clear profile of functions, competencies and working environments for the professional educator in health care was defined, the identification of a specific scope of intervention for the extra school educator still seemed somewhat controversial. This because over time there was an overlap of forms/figures, roles and functions kept under the common definition of “professional educator”.

Today, a plurality of paths that makes the professional panorama articulated and complex still characterizes the educational reality of educators; in fact, in the context of personal services coexist several generations of educators whose motivation, access paths and approach to work differ substantially. Until recently, the great gap was the lack of a legal framework that defines the foundation, training, scopes, places, functions, competences profiles, access and competent authorities that would legitimate the educational, formative and pedagogical work done by educators and pedagogists.

The professional educator is referred to as the social worker who, in possession of the qualifying degree and then having a specific conceptual and technical-practical preparation, implements educational and rehabilitation projects characterized by intentionality and continuity, aimed at a balanced development of the personality with educational/relational objectives in a context of participation and recovery to daily life (Orefice, 2011). He cares about the positive psychosocial integration or reintegration

tion of subjects in situations of hardships or exposed to the risk of marginalization and deviance.

The socio-pedagogical educator employs methodologies focused on interpersonal relationships, implementing targeted interventions toward individuals, families, groups and territorial environment. The tools he uses relate to psycho-pedagogical and social rehabilitation methodologies. He also exercises functions of planning, organization and management in the context of social-educational and health care services. Conducts studies, research and documentation activity (Santelli, 2014). He carries out educational projects aimed at enhancing personal autonomy, helping the development of individual potentialities and increasing social relations with the environment of the subjects (Bertolini, 1996). The educator works in the everyday life of the subject thanks to a close relationship with the student, sharing with him many hours of the days and several important moments. This allows him to conduct a much more thorough observation on the person or group that is following, compared to other operators (psychologists, social assistants, etc.), and is therefore able to formulate and conduct educational objectives that are more effective. He tends to configure himself as a pedagogical figure that develops educational processes in the extra school environment, with rehabilitative functions aimed at promoting the revitalization of the human potential of subjects with difficult situations and their reintegration into society (Barone, 2003).

Over the past fifteen years, much has been invested at European level on education and training. In fact, the Barcelona European Council held in March 2002 approved the work programme *Education and Training 2010* that, in the wake of the Lisbon strategy, for the first time has established a solid framework for European cooperation in education and training, based on common objectives. The key objective was to help improve national education and training systems through the development of complementary instruments at Community level, mutual learning and exchange of good practices through the method of open coordination (Guerra, Caldin, 2017).

However, if at European level the *professional development and improvement of the quality of the educational and training system* represents a clear priority, at national levels there is not a clear vision about those skills necessary to satisfy the definition of professional profiles. It is still difficult to find educators in possession of the title and this constitutes a reinforcing element to the insertion of personnel without a specific training. Another factor that determines the problem is that the demand for professional educators today is exceeding the offer and finds ground in specific regional standards of operation of services.

The placement of educators not specifically trained, carries the risk of creating a work situation extremely uneven, which combines operators with poor, void or high professionalism and motivation. This creates the need to employ as educators subjects with different titles with subsequent relapses on the level of the quality of interventions and on the level of professionalism put in place. The national research survey Prin 7 “*for the recognition of educational and formative professions in the European context: which professions, with which pedagogical profile and related education, for which work*”, is the first research work that presents the situation of this professional sector in an organic and comprehensive way (Orefice, Carullo, Calaprice, 2011).

Highlighting *the expansion of the social demand for education and training*, such a step has stressed the need for professional figures specifically prepared to act with knowledge and skills adequate to the heterogeneity presented by social problems, and therefore the need of educational offerings able to legitimize their professionalism. (Calaprice, 2007).

Thanks to their research more and more in synergy with educational and training needs of a society in constant transformation and despite many organizational difficulties, the faculties of educational sciences have tried to guarantee *both a teaching method*, to ensure a training of high pedagogical quality (Master's Degrees) and a *professional figure* (Three-years Degree). For example, like the educator without the *professional* diction, in order not to conflict with the one formed by the faculty of medicine, but with a formation and competences clearly inclined toward social assistance and health care (Calaprice, 2007).

At the same time, the *European directive* of 2005 calls on member States to regulate the professional activities within the European framework. Just like that of education and particularly of university education, is considered an indispensable condition for the development of the European labor market, inside and outside the continent, in the broader scenario of the European Space of the Society and Economy of the knowledge, advanced and competitive. Therefore, the lack of a professional register and legislative recognition for graduates of former Faculties of Educational Sciences, today Departments, has created problems such as: for the educator (Three-years Degree) being excluded from the competitions and not only those with a health care background; for the pedagogue (Master's Degree and/or Quadrennial Degree), established professional figure for years, being replaced in roles and functions from other accredited professional figures, such as the Psychologist (Calaprice, 2007).

On June 21, 2016, an important milestone was reached for educators and pedagogists: the House of Parliament approved the law No. 2656

“Discipline of the professions of educator and pedagogist”, born from two texts presented by Vanna Iori and Paola Binetti. This law represents a real historical turning point after 20 years of legislative vacuum: it redefines the role of the health care educator and of the socio-pedagogical educator, giving each figure a precise area of action. The socio-pedagogical professional educator will need to graduate in the L-19 class and will carry out his services along with the pedagogist, in the following areas: social education, social assistance and social health care (related to socio-educational aspects). Therefore, he will be able to deal with schools, education, family, sports and integration of foreigners, motor abilities and parenthood. The professional social health care educator will operate in the health care and social health care fields. Instead, he does not provide his activity at socio-educational structures. In summary, the two professionals will work within the best framework suited to their competences and both in the social health care. In addition, with this law for the first time a university degree will be mandatory to access educational professions. In fact, today there are educators working even since many years without having a university degree because of rules that once allowed such a thing.

Nonetheless, there are still policy issues related to professions that remained open, on which institutional and associative actors still must work. The EPIC research project, *Educational Professions In Comparison* (whose purpose is to recognize the educational professions in the European context and indicate: which professions, with which pedagogical profile and related education and for which work), represents a path of progress and development.

The 4/2013 law on the recognition of professional associations provided a legal input at Italian level to “resolve” the issue in an innovative way, without resorting to the “obsolete” instrument of professional bodies, but pointing to a methodological approach focused on: definition of the professional profile in terms of competences; definition and certification of performing professional service according to *international* standards. The EPIC project has set some objectives of development. The first objective aims at a clear and shared definition of *professional profiles* of the Educator and Pedagogist in terms of competences. To achieve this first objective is necessary to know, compare and possibly harmonize the curricula on educational professions present at national levels, to offer a proposal suited to a professional figure able to meet national and European expectations.

The second objective aims to determine the procedures for performing the requested professional service (in harmony with the outlined profile) based on European standard of certification.

This is a goal that requires a profound cultural change both by universities and associations, as it asks to find a possible agreement on both the discipline of trainings to access the profession and the discipline for a possible licensing exam.

The universities promote the activation of interdepartmental or inter-universities programs between structures related to the medical area and those related to the area of educational and training sciences, in order to achieve a degree in the L-19 class or in the L/SNT/2 class. They also promote the recognition of an increased number of credits to those students who, having already one of the two titles intend to achieve the other one.

2. The competences of the professional socio-pedagogical educator

The common sense gives to competence the generic meaning of the ability to orient oneself in a particular field, to dominate it and to master it. Based on this interpretation, it appears that competence is a polysemic notion because it applies to a broad range of professional and scientific fields. Scientifically there are numerous definitions of competence. The first meaning dates back to the 1940s, which identified competence with a work performance of the subject, observable and measurable. Quoting the concise and hard-hitting definition given by Pellerey, “competence is what I am able to do with what I know” (Pellerey, 2010).

The concept of competence is central today in all educational systems (school education, training, work) and at various levels. In Italy, in the 1990s, the term competence has been taken into consideration especially in the field of education of professional training (Castoldi, 2016).

To create, acknowledge, formalize and consolidate a profession, it is not sufficient its recognition merely by specific laws. A solid and shared body of competences needs to characterize it. In fact, the educator needs to have specific skills to perform his functions. It is not enough to be willing and well-motivated toward the other person to achieve an educational intervention, but one must possess capabilities, skills and competencies produced and fed by a continuous process of training and self-education. The complexity and multiplicity of interventions and of contexts in which the educator operates, entails the need to acquire multiform skills, varied and transversal, which refer both to theoretical areas and to those methodological-practical. In the work practice, in addition to gained knowledge and increasingly sophisticated procedural abilities, the professional uses a personal sensitivity.

Therefore, the central element of this passage from “familiar to profes-

sional” regarding taking care is the competence (Muschitiello, 2008). In fact, the profession is frequently defined as a set of competences necessary to become part of the profession itself. Specifically, this has to do with a corpus of theoretical knowledge, of practice and operation methodologies, of attitudes and psychosocial resources. In the light of what emerged so far, the construct of competence has slowly begun to complexify and to involve three levels in the process of learning to know: knowledge and representations of the world that the subject builds for himself through stimuli coming from the external environment and from encoded knowing; to know how to do: abilities intended as operational schemes that allow the subject to act in physical and mental shape on material or symbolic objects; to know how to be: competences intended as the ability of the subject to respond to individual and social needs and effectively carry out an activity or task while interacts properly with the reality in which he operates, in both the subjective side (relationship with himself and with others) and the objective side (relationship with the context of action and with the reality task).

With the term “competency” we refer to the possession, by the subject, of the ability to manifest appropriate behaviors in different situations. This wealth consists of cognitive competences (related to knowledge), methodological competences (related to operativity) and from personal skills (related to the individual’s psychosocial resources).

The dimension of *knowing* is crucial because it orients the practice; without it, in fact, there would be no understanding of the experience. Therefore, cognitive skills should not be detached from the practice, but they must be interconnected to it in reciprocity and circularity. Methodological competences are to be understood as ability of action, as ability to identify the most appropriate strategies and tools to complete educational processes. «It comes to design, implement and evaluate interventions by defining methods and applying the most appropriate techniques». Therefore, such methodological competences allow the educator to develop a procedural capacity that, through the transfer of knowledge in operational resources, allows carrying out interventions of growth, development and change. In fact, referring to methodological possible choices, in terms of objectives to achieve, the educational activity extemporaneous, occasional or, conversely, rigid by default, can become a scientifically based practice (this also highlights the importance of experimental pedagogy).

The fundamental skill of the professional educator is the *pedagogical competence*, while the primary tool he has to implement the educational process is the *educational relationship*. “The pedagogical competence can be defined as the complex and dynamic set of knowledge, abilities,

methodological procedures, and of consolidate and orderly educational experiences, based on reflection and pedagogical theorizing, which specifically connotes the educational professionalism and that all the subjects operating in this field should put in place in a personal and critical way when they design, implement and evaluate their intervention”. The pedagogical competence rests and moves in harmony with the perspective of globalization; in fact, any educational event is realized as an organic and complex set of elements or variables in close connection between them. The globality allows working educationally avoiding partiality that does not take into account the inherent and constitutive complexity of the educational fact and, above all, allows the opening towards other points of view and other professionals.

3. The contribution of Experimental Pedagogy for the construction of competences

For some time now, the experimental pedagogy and educational technologies are configured as another direction of the pedagogical area's research. Today, after overcoming the naïve interpretations of the 1920s, this part of the pedagogical discourse is not limited to field surveys, but raises questions over interpretative models knowing the importance of an epistemological clarity and congruence between methods and purposes of research. This helps sharpen the modalities to live one's own experiences in the context of a culture increasingly permeated by new technological dimensions. From the second half of the past century, the experimental pedagogy and educational technologies constitute an increasingly important direction of research in the pedagogical area.

In the preceding paragraph concerning the competences of the socio-pedagogical professional educator, we pointed out the importance of knowing how to do research and choose among different educational contexts of reference those appropriate methodologies and instruments that can have a positive impact within educational contexts. Unfortunately, in practice, the cognitive activities that teachers and educators exercise towards their users is often led by a volunteer work of investigation, made of informal talks, of an observation activity not conducted according to shared scientific protocols, of improvised questionnaires and sporadic record of behaviors (Trincherò, 2009). The cognitive principle that often drove this activity was that of common sense. The insufficient systematization of detecting procedures and the wide discretion in analysis and interpretation of the data collected in the field, reflect the shortage of train-

ing paths and of time devoted to analyze modalities of acquisition, processing and systematization of empirical knowledge obtained from field detection. In fact, during those same years the didactical and pedagogical research about learning theories, individualization of the teaching, programming by objectives, organization of curricula, building skills and competences and evaluation of results, formed the basis of that of that “pedagogy that pays attention to the factual reality”, experimental and empirical, that today should represent the socio-pedagogical expertise of the professional educator.

The methodology of empirical research in human sciences is a discipline that finds very little space in upper secondary school curricula, and quite a limited space in university and post-graduated training courses. The acquisition of methodological competences, however, is an important training element for socio-pedagogical professional educators (Trincherò, 2009). Moreover, their action in the field requires that they assume a searching attitude. Observe the events, dialogue with actors involved, to seize relevant aspects of any given educational reality, know how to read and analyze situations and gain operational input, must be part of their competences. In fact, the cognitive activity of operators cannot be based on mere common sense, but should be as close as possible to the systematic and controlled cognitive activity that characterizes scientific knowledge. This does not mean weakening the educator sensitivity to replace it with cold scientific control procedures, but valuing a self-reflective and self-evaluative attitude summarized in the motto “we do it this way, we check if it works and, if not, we change it” (for example, consider the international Leonardo project, “Reflect”, conducted by A. Nuzzacci on reflective competences between educational professionalism and teaching).

The ability to transform the experience in competence, overcoming the risk of a dangerous superficiality, requires the ability to reflect critically on one’s own experience, to know how to decompose it in its essential elements, to systematize it in segments of knowledge that are consistent between them, to build explanatory models able to crystalize it in units of knowledge, to take advantage of these units to take appropriate decisions and to be able to critically evaluate their outcome.

These operations remind very closely the activity of the investigator aimed at producing scientific knowledge starting from empirical detections. Therefore, the professionalism of the educator requires him to know how to listen, reflect, model, design and evaluates his own ideas (Calvani, 2011). He is not a mere performer of paradigms fell from above, but an active and creative presence that knows how to interpret situations

offered by the context and is able to offer original, creative and, above all, adequate, effective and efficient answers.

Through the educational research it is possible to find concrete tools to meet the needs that arise in educational and formative processes, to adapt the practices to the characteristics of users and contexts, evaluate the adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency of practices, rationalize the use of resources, organize the group of operators at the best, facilitate the communication between different professionals operating in the same scope, document actions and outline models, monitor activities of centers for educational and formative services and understand whether the processes are reaching the set objectives. We are immersed in very quick changes. Therefore, for socio-pedagogical professional educators it is more important than acquiring critical reading abilities and the capacity to design and implement appropriate educational paths. The attention to the educational process can only start from the understanding that it represents a complex process, which is not effective due to adopting a certain methodology or another one, but because focusing on an extensive repertoire it makes a method more effective than another on the basis of the context and of cognitive processes of each subject and of his learning abilities.

Therefore, the socio-pedagogical professional educator will need to know how to evaluate each situation to get out of his “toolbox” (that experimental pedagogy has substantially contributed to build) the most suitable tool (methodology). For example, let’s think about the preparation and distribution of a semi-structured questionnaire, or about conducting in-depth interviews to detect how the subject considers himself. Only a strong competence in the field of experimental pedagogy will drive the educator in the proper realization of such educational interventions. Therefore, the validity of the data that will emerge will be directly proportional to the level of methodological competence he possesses.

The experimental pedagogy can provide the socio-pedagogical professional educator with a wealth of contributions: just think about the tools provided through the research based on the array of data, structured observation, bivariate analysis, choice of sample, collection of data, preparation of questionnaires, tests or profit objective tests, research by experiment, interpretative research, conducting an interview, experiential observation, the action-research and case studies. Then, the one provided by the experimental pedagogy is a toolbox that contributes significantly to qualify as high the profile of the socio-pedagogical professional educator (as set out in the art.2 of the Law 2656).

Thanks to the new model of competences (in which the “know how to

do” of experimental matrix is essential), students will be able to use the acquired knowledge, promoting the development of a pro-active thinking not the accumulation of inert knowledge. It means for educators to give the boys the opportunity to face open and challenging problems, taken from the real world, supporting them through constant instructional guide. Such a guide should teach them the best way to analyze those problems in order to solve them (giving significance to objects, events and situations), and to deal with them according to effective strategies. It should also help the boys to meditate on their interpretations and actions with the purpose to develop the ability to find and correct their own mistakes.

The educational action should aim to change also the attitude that students have toward problems: from avoiding situation that may bring to possible failures (which is a possible explanation of the high rate of unanswered questions in the Ocse-Pisa survey), to get involved in situations that may test an individual so to learn from his own mistakes, grow up and become independent. Training for competences can do a lot in this direction to help children to establish a positive relationship with knowledge and with reality, supported by curiosity and desire to grow. The valorization of non-formal and informal knowledge of students represents today an antidote to demotivation and early school abandon. Knowing how to enhance one’s own experiences and critically meditate on them, distinguishing “what is good” from “what needs to be changed”, is an important requirement for lifelong learning. Often, children who are unmotivated or that abandon the school system have a lack of key competences as to “know how to learn”. This exposes them to the threat of failures throughout their life, such as long-term unemployment or low-skilled jobs. For this reason, we can build the success of the students by teaching them to learn effectively, and this aspect should be explicitly included in school curricula and in the long-life training of educators. Learning to learn and training for competences are closely interrelated.

There is a need for realistic educational proposals, without leaving that such operating orientation weakens the necessary reference to the interpretative and theoretical horizon, which contextualizes such proposals and give them sense. This is the duty and power of the educational research that should know how to get out of ruts of mere speculation or myopic empiricism, to open up to a fruitful synergy between different and complementary approaches: theoretical deduction, but also experiential induction, analysis, historical understanding and experimental verification (Viganò, 2002).

Surely, much work is still to be done. We can recall just an example: the significant differences between the regions of Italy with regard to the

results of the Pisa 2009 survey in Reading, Mathematics and Science (Trinchero, 2012). In terms of opportunity, school education does not seem able to overcome the initial disadvantage between students from different regions: the presence of socio-pedagogical operators can represent a significant help.

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