Student Teachers' Interest in and Expectations of their Studies and their Profession: Empirical Research and Critical Reflection on Teaching Competencies and Qualifications

Interesse e aspettative degli studenti di Scienze della Formazione verso il loro studio e la loro futura professione: una ricerca empirica e riflessioni critiche su competenze e qualifiche

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ABSTRACT

Student teachers' interest and expectations guide their future behavior in relation to work and are relevant for their professionalization – and also in in relation to the demands that will be made of them by the labor market. This paper elucidates student teachers' interest in and expectations of their studies and their future profession; specifically, it considers their expectations of the future and of their studies, their decision to undertake study and their interest in it, and their motivation for attending classes. 154 student teachers at the Faculty of Education at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano participated in the research and filled out the online questionnaire. The participants' responses show a strong focus on qualifications, labor market opportunities, teaching practice, and aspirations to security – for example, a stable relationship, children, and their own home. Student teachers choose the study program out of personal interest and its perceived fit with their individual competencies. However, the content of study does not always meet their expectations. Finally, the results of the research are used as the basis for critical reflection on teaching competencies and academic qualifications.

Gli interessi e le aspettative degli studenti di Scienze della Formazione dirigono il loro futuro comportamento lavorativo e orientano lo stesso iter di professionalizzazione, anche in considerazione delle richieste provenienti dal mondo del lavoro. Questo contributo fa emergere nuovi risultati empirici sull'interesse e sulle aspettative degli studenti nei confronti dei loro studi e della loro futura professione; in particolare, l'articolo fornisce informazioni sulle loro prospettive di vita, sulle aspettative nei confronti dello studio, sulla scelta e sull'interesse per gli studi e sulla motivazione a frequentare le lezioni. 154 studenti della Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione della Libera Università di Bolzano hanno partecipato alla ricerca e hanno compilato il questionario online. Le risposte dei partecipanti mostrano un forte orientamento verso l'ottenimento del titolo di studio, le opportunità sul mercato del lavoro, la pratica dell'insegnamento, e verso valori quali la sicurezza, rappresentata da una relazione stabile, figli e una casa di proprietà. Gli studenti di Scienze della Formazione scelgono questo programma di studio perché

riflette l'interesse e le competenze personali, anche se i contenuti delle lezioni non sempre soddisfano le loro aspettative. I risultati della ricerca conducono a una riflessione critica sulle competenze professionali e sulle qualifiche accademiche.

1. Introduction

Teaching is much more than a job and is strongly influenced by individual characteristics such as motivation, expectations, attitudes, interest, values, and assumptions concerning education, learning and society, as well as by socio-cultural circumstances, traditions, and the status of the profession; the competencies required for teaching are thus a complex blend (European Commission, 2013). It is necessary to examine student teachers' professionalization processes and characteristics in order to develop strategies that empower prospective teachers to behave professionally and appropriately in today's classrooms. As emphasized by the European Commission (2013), teachers' knowledge, skills and commitment are among the most important factors for the achievement of high-quality educational outcomes.

Before addressing the interest and expectations of future teachers, this paper discusses teaching as a profession. Even if teaching meets the criteria of a profession – professions fulfil central functions for society and guarantee their members stable employment, and are characterized by specific knowledge, responsibility, autonomy, and organization (Keiner, 2011) – until a few decades ago it was classed as a semi-profession. Reasons for this were, for example, the strong and lasting influence of the churches on educational systems and the relatively late academization of the sector. As a result, the concept of the "professional" within education is contested and remains a matter of debate, and the teaching profession continues to face challenges as to how to position itself in relation to other professions (Goodwyn, 2010). Moreover, the teaching profession suffers from stereotypes and low (perceived) prestige (Gross, 2019).

The need for a sustainable model for the teaching profession is clear. As Margiotta (2019) states, it is necessary to move away both from a model that is clinical and known as a "strong profession" (p. 51), and from one that is focused on needs, toward the development of a critical and agency-oriented model for the profession. Hence, Margiotta emphasizes that it is not the retrospective view of the profession that is linked to the methodological processes of anamnesis, diagnosis, therapy, prognosis and monitoring, but a view of the profession that emphasizes the role of teachers as social actors, with the appropriate capabilities for their actions (in this regard, see also the capability approach by Nussbaum, 2012, and, Sen, 2000[1]). By emphasizing the role of teachers, pre- and in-service teacher trai-

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1 According to the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2012; Sen, 2000), every *individuum* is capable of

ning contributes to the achievement of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, especially goal number four (quality education), goal number ten (reduced inequalities), and goal number 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) (ONU, 2015). Many researchers in Italy are interested in the role educational systems play in sustainable development (see e.g., Alessandrini, 2019; Cagol & Dozza, 2019). From this perspective, educational systems need to rethink their curricula to enable students to develop a professional profile that meets the demands of the labor market. This also applies to teacher training; top-down introduction of changes to curricula may overlook the fact that every learning process is guided by individual interest and expectations, which are relevant for prospective teachers' construction of their identity. As future teachers' competency development – for example, in relation to student motivation[2] – will be guided by their individual characteristics, individuals' interest and expectations should be taken into account if changes to promote innovative teaching and learning are to be successfully introduced.

Focusing on student teachers' interest and expectations is thus necessary to facilitate effective teaching and learning in the context of teacher education and training. Student teachers' interest in and expectations of their studies and their profession determine how they engage with their studies and behave in their everyday working life. Moreover, this knowledge is fundamental for universities in order to make the teaching profession more attractive to a wider pool of candidates. The need to make the teaching profession more appealing is highlighted in documents published by the European Commission (e.g., 2015) as one of the prerequisites for policies to promote teaching as a career in Europe.

2. Academic Qualifications and the Labor Market

Opportunities in the labor market have a decisive impact on the choice of a training or study program. Analyzing the professional profiles of all those working in education continues to be a critical task for education faculties, and the results reflect an epistemological and political classification that is strongly related to social and labor market demands (for more information on professions in education, see Corbi & Perillo, 2015).

While professional development and higher quality education systems are priorities at the European level, differing educational systems and labor market demands mean that a number of nations do not have a clear vision of the competencies required to meet and define professional profiles (Calaprice, 2015). Although teacher training is organized differently in different European countries, with a range of entry requirements and modalities of access, there is a shared ten-

being (personality, mood, emotions) and doing (practice, action). The approach considers human development to be a process that expands the opportunities individuals are given to lead a healthy life, to be educated, to have access to the resources necessary for well-being, and to have opportunities for lifelong learning. Education aims to put individuals in a position to develop and express their full potential, to allow everyone to express their freedom of choice in different situations and to fully realize themselves as human beings. In the field of educational sciences, therefore, the capability approach encourages the reframing of teacher training in terms of freedom and skills, and makes it necessary to include student teachers' interests, and their expectations of their studies and their future profession.

2   For an overview of the centrality of educational relationship and school motivation, and the resulting need for a corresponding focus in pre- and in-service teacher education, see Tempesta (2018).

dency toward increased qualification requirements as a prerequisite for entering the profession. Sohlberg, Czaplicka and Lindblad (2011) – drawing on results from an international comparative study – point out that the demand for formal qualifications has increased, but the impact and influence of professional knowledge seem to have decreased. Margiotta too (2012) emphasizes that the acquisition of higher qualifications does not always equate to the acquisition of real-world knowledge, skills and competencies that can be certified and validated at the end of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences. The author thus recommends moving from a welfare model of education and training – with the labor market and employability at its center – to a learnfare model aimed at strengthening individual competencies and capabilities. Teacher training, like education and training in general, also plays a key role in the identification of solutions to increasing shortages in quantitative and qualitative competencies: Margiotta (2012) underlines that qualitative shortages derive from the increased importance given by employers to social competencies such as teamwork, interpersonal communication, initiative, creativity, entrepreneurship, leadership and management, presentation skills and the ability to learn.

In the national context – in contrast to other countries such as Germany – a Master's degree in Primary Education acts as a qualification for kindergarten and primary school teaching, and no further examination or training is necessary to enter the profession. It is assumed that the additional assessment of competencies – which is present for other professions, but absent here – has a direct impact on the perception that it is necessary to acquire the competencies in question.

3. Student Teachers' Choice of Studies, Interest and Expectations

Several studies have been conducted to investigate student teachers' choice of course[3]; for example, Argentin (2010) found that Italian students had chosen the profession mainly because they were interested in working with children and adolescents. In addition, the author states that prospective teachers had chosen the profession first out of a sense of vocation, and second as a result of instrumentality – namely, for example, to achieve financial security.

Student teachers' interest has also been the focus of research for several decades, with mainly consistent (inter)national results, in particular as far as a perceived lack of focus on practice is concerned. Vannini and Mantovani (2007), for example, studied 238 former primary school teacher trainees at the University of Bologna and, inter alia, looked at their interest in teacher training and their assessment of its quality. Nearly 90% of participants took a positive view of their decision to study the course and would choose it again. The students appreciated the following aspects of their studies: the faculty offers a broad range of theoretical courses, laboratories and training (89% of participants agreed) and a good balance between subject disciplines, teaching techniques, and general educational theory (86% of participants agreed), and delivers good teaching skills (78% of participants agreed). However, 97% of former students criticized their courses for providing only limited practical experience.

Student teachers' interest in teacher training relates to the forms and habits of knowledge acquisition, and to the use and processing of subject-specific litera-

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3   For an overview of demographics and personality characteristics, as well as the interest and performance motivation of student teachers in Germany, see Cramer (2016).

ture. Keiner (2000b) has already looked at teacher training students' study preferences, time investment, use of information sources, and reading behavior in two universities in Germany. The author found that student teachers' expectations had a critical impact, and are also relevant for teaching and research in educational sciences. The student teachers displayed moderate expectations of their studies, reported low time investment, made strong references to everyday knowledge, and demonstrated low levels of subject-specific knowledge acquisition. Gross and Herzer (2019) also followed this research focus, studying learning behavior among student teachers at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. They found that student teachers consider lectures and production of papers less important than practical experience. Participants showed greater interest in educational practice and internships than in traditional working methods.

Moreover, research has revealed that students' motivation and their interest in their studies decrease over their years of study (Keiner, 2004). Accordingly, university entrants are more performance and success-oriented than students in higher years of study. In teacher education, students are asked to be self-regulated learners who possess and develop well-founded knowledge about teaching and learning. Performance motivation undoubtedly plays an important role in the acquisition of well-founded knowledge. Cramer (2012) undertook a longitudinal study of the professional development of secondary school teacher students in Germany. Among other things, he looked at students' experiences during their studies. He found that male students avoid extra work to a greater extent than female students. The time students invest in their education depends not only on curricular opportunities, but also on their attitude toward work.

This brief literature review leads to the conclusion that while some studies have examined student teachers' characteristics, choice of course and motivation, no research has yet related student teachers' interest and expectations to teaching competencies and qualification requirements. The present paper hence aims to reflect on the necessary competencies and qualifications for prospective teachers based on their interest in and expectations of their study program and profession.

4. Methodology

4.1 *Instrument*

The data analyzed for this paper refer to a larger research project on student teachers' culture in the Faculty of Education at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. In the context of this project, a questionnaire was developed by adapting features of three different instruments: 1. Engagement and passion, expectations and performance motivation, and student teachers' interest in the content of study (Keiner, 2000a, 2000b); 2. Performance motivation at school and understanding of school and education (Cramer, 2012); 3. Student teachers' motivation, satisfaction with the study program, and their attitude to children (Peitz & Fthenakis, 2007).

The instrument was validated qualitatively with student teachers in the Faculty of Education at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. This allowed the researchers to include their viewpoints and suggestions. Consequently, all final questions were piloted with a small sample that reflects the intended target group, namely student teachers. Their comments were discussed, and minor consequential changes were made. The final questionnaire from the research project on student teachers' culture included 49 questions relating to: student teachers' background,

view of pedagogy, engagement and passion, expectations and performance motivation, interest in the content of study, prestige of the future profession, attitude to children, and teamwork.

In order to answer the research question of the present paper, items from the "expectations and performance motivation" and "students' interest in teacher education" sections were analyzed. For each question, respondents were given the option of providing additional information in open-ended text boxes.

4.2   *Participants, Data Collection, and Data Analysis*

Data for the larger study on student culture were collected in July and August 2017 from 154 student teachers within different seminars at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (Faculty of Education), who were given the option of participating in the study and filling out the online questionnaire. Most participants were female (83%) and in their first or second year of study (nearly 58%). The remaining student teachers were enrolled in year three or four. Most student teachers were attending the German-language Master's program in Primary Education – the Faculty of Education offers a German-, an Italian- and a Ladin-language Master's program in Primary Education. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the research question.

5.   Results and Discussion

5.1   *Expectations for the Future*

A set of items asked how student teachers imagined their life in their mid-thirties. Participants could choose multiple items that represented their expectations. The results (see Figure 1) show a relatively uniform homogeneous student group.

Three out of four student teachers expected to be in a stable relationship, have children and to own their own home. This information corresponds – according to one of the most influential theories of human values, developed by Schwartz (1992, 1994) – to values of security. These values apply to all the guiding principles of human life and include safety, harmony, social stability, relationships, and the self.

Power was the least selected option, and this implies atypical behavior compared with professions in general. Professions tend to be characterized by a focus on power: professionals tend to strive for economic, social, or political power. However, the teaching profession does not have any direct social or political power (Mertes, 2011). Career opportunities are restricted, and the teacher's domain is limited to the classroom. These results highlight the teaching profession's ongoing special status and the legacy of its status as a semi-profession (Keiner, 2011).
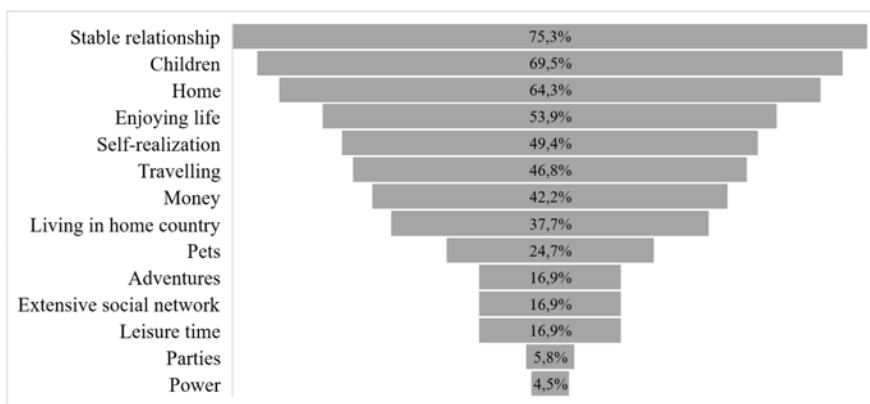
Figure 1: Percentages of student teachers' responses in relation to their expectations for the future. Multiple responses were permitted

5.2 *Expectations of studies*

As far as student teachers' expectations of their studies were concerned, there was evidence of a high level of focus on practice, occupational sectors and their requirements, and low interest in academic research questions and methods (see Figure 2). This has strong implications for teacher education, knowledge acquisition and management. If the focus on practice, requirements and a recognized qualification as a condition of entering the profession are more important than motives such as teachers' own interest in and focus on an academic habitus and related working methods, this implies that student teachers are mostly extrinsically motivated in relation to their studies. 3.6% of students also mentioned other expectations in an open text field: increased internships, a permanent teaching contract, and better educational opportunities.

As pointed out by the European Commission (2013), teachers will increasingly need to take a critical and evidence-based approach; and such an approach requires an orientation toward academic questions and working methods in teacher education. However, only 3.7% of student teachers shared this expectation in relation to their studies.

The student teachers' call for a greater focus on practice is an ongoing factor in teacher education and training; for decades, these results have repeatedly emerged from empirical research, as already highlighted by the literature review through the findings of Vannini and Mantovani (2007). It is therefore arguable whether higher qualifications have led to the expansion of competencies (Margiotta, 2012) that are crucial to educational practice. It is not the intention of this paper to undermine the importance of qualifications, as they are the drivers of formal education and continuing development – in the sense of the German expression: *Höherbildung der Menschheit* [improvement of humanity through education]. Nevertheless, it is necessary to create ways of enhancing the value of informal education and putting greater emphasis on individual competencies than on academic degrees.
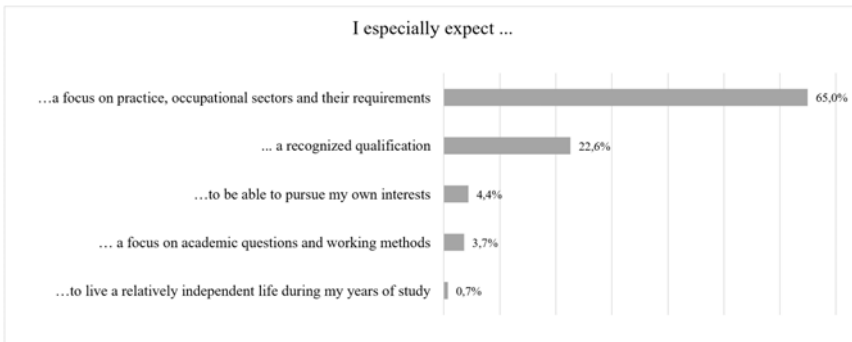
Figure 2: Student teachers' expectations of their studies, expressed as percentages

The strong focus amongst students on getting the degree required to enter the teaching profession was reinforced by responses on the wishes student teachers would like to be granted by a fairy. Over 30% of students stated that they would like to receive their degree immediately. Figure 3 shows that knowledge acquisition – either as implanted or the ability to remember everything – was selected less often.

If student teachers primarily choose their course of study in order to obtain a teaching qualification and not out of any intrinsic motivation, this has an influence on their processes of learning and professionalization. The perception of the need for a Master's degree remains limited. There are a variety of explanations for this focus on the degree instead of on the knowledge acquisition and the expansion of competence and experience: first, the late academization of the profession, second, the ongoing trend toward increased qualification levels as prerequisites for entering the profession, and, third, the seemingly unsolvable theory-practice issue.
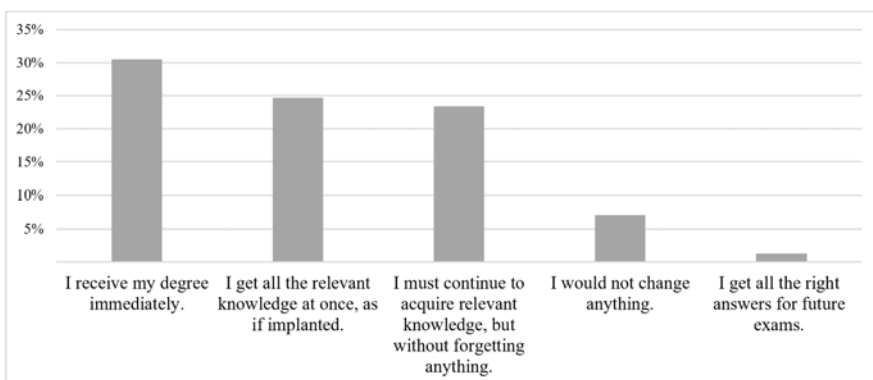

Figure 3: Student teachers' wishes, expressed as percentages

5.3   *Decision for and interest in studies*

When asked about the importance of factors in their decision to pursue a course in Primary Education, 72.7% of student teachers again mentioned opportunities on the labor market. Most students expect to be financially secure after completing their studies. Interestingly, only one in four students mentioned social standing as being a factor that had influenced their decision. These results reflect the above-mentioned conclusions relating to the focus on security, low levels of ambition for power, and opportunities on the labor market.
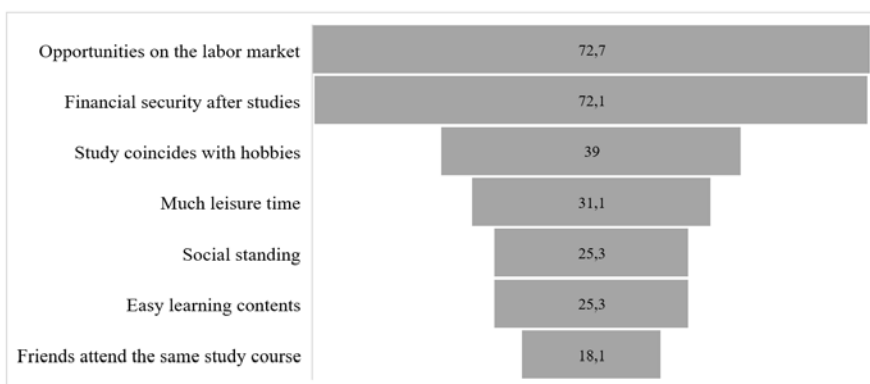

Figure 4: Reasons for choosing the study program, with percentages. The percentages include the responses "strongly agree" and "agree". Multiple responses were permitted

Generally, students choose the Master's program in Primary Education and the teaching profession because the content of the study course reflects their personal skills and because they personally attach a high importance to such study. However, Figure 5 indicates some contradiction in student teachers' responses. While, on the one hand, student teachers state that the content of learning has a positive effect on their state of mind, on the other hand, they admit that many areas of their studies leave them feeling indifferent and that dealing with course content is not one of their favorite activities. Only a few students report that they have thought of abandoning their studies and doubt their decision to pursue their future profession.
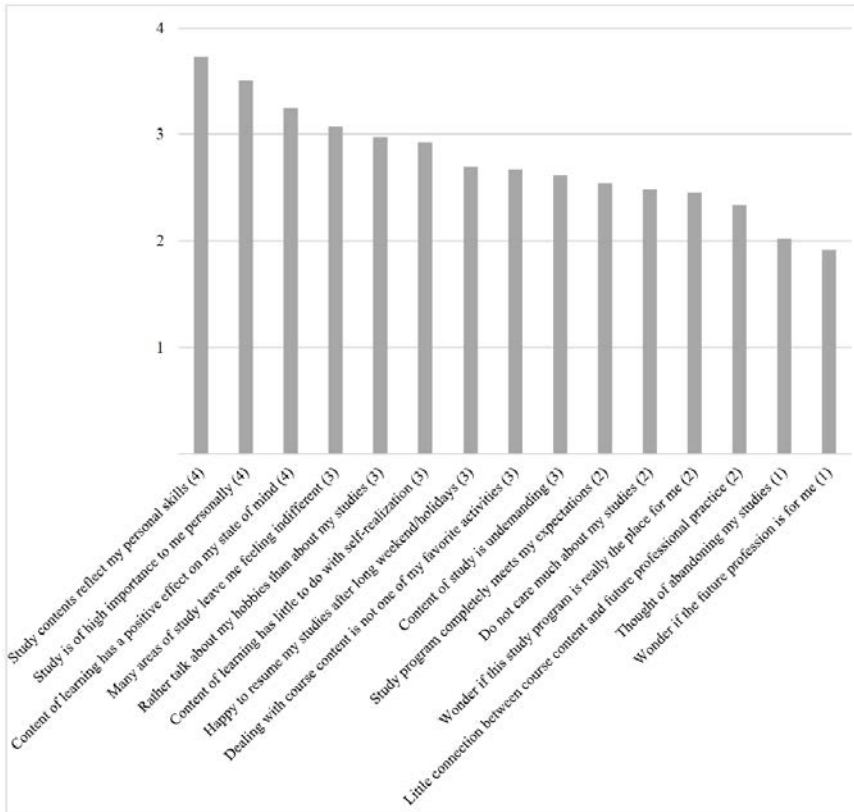
Figure 5: Student teachers' evaluation and interest in their studies (mean values). 1: strongly disagree; 4: strongly agree. Medians are displayed in brackets

Figure 6 shows that the student teachers' attendance of classes is influenced by the time available to them. 35% of students state that they would attend courses outside the formal curriculum if they had more time. More than 40% only attend mandatory classes; this result is more likely to be influenced by time limitations than by a low interest in class content. Only 4.5% state that they stopped attending courses because they lost interest.
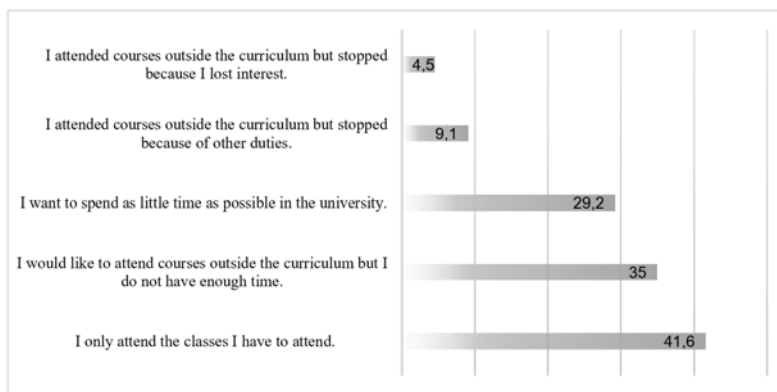
I attended courses outside the curriculum but stopped because I lost interest.	4,5	
I attended courses outside the curriculum but stopped because of other duties.	9,1	
I want to spend as little time as possible in the university.	29,2	
I would like to attend courses outside the curriculum but I do not have enough time.	35	
I only attend the classes I have to attend.	41,6	

Figure 6: Percentages of student teachers who chose "strongly agree" or "agree" on questions relating to course attendance. Multiple responses were permitted

6. Conclusions and Implications

The results presented highlight some methodological limitations in the research design: other methodologies that allow for stronger involvement by participants, for example, transformative action research, would, in addition, contribute to the empowerment of student teachers. Even if this paper reflects only a small part of reality, the findings provide information on student teachers' interests and expectations and thus on values they may also transmit to future generations.

This paper highlights the interdependence of learning and teaching and asserts that a general educational framework is only appropriate when it is linked to learners' experiences, interests, and expectations. The generativity of education provides the opportunity to connect current social, cultural, and economic issues by means of a common process and a canon of knowledge. This represents an educational challenge that requires teachers and educators from kindergarten to higher education to be ready to deal with group dynamics and conflicts, to allow uncertainties and to cultivate a sensitive and reflective position as mediators and advisors.

The downsides of degrees being the only prerequisite for entering the teaching profession are also highlighted by this research. For other professions – and for the teaching profession in other countries – it is common practice to sit an additional state examination regulated by the public authorities after graduating. Since the topics and contents selected for such examinations are highly diverse, students feel the need to acquire the relevant long-term knowledge and competence, even if this is extrinsically motivated. The discussion has covered the need for a stronger emphasis on individual competencies; however, this does not imply reduced assessment of such competencies, which should meet international criteria. In this regard, the general conclusion drawn by Margiotta (2011) should be mentioned: dialogue on educational policy with other European countries should stimulate revision and adaptation of teacher training and its underlying policies, without neglecting the nation's social, cultural and historical background.

Referring to European Union guidelines, Margiotta (2011) points out that teacher education is encouraged to prepare teachers not only to acquire disciplinary, curricular and pedagogical knowledge but also to take account of innovation, and

social and cultural issues. Teacher education is strongly linked with the socio-cultural environment and the formal but hidden curriculum of the university in question[4]. In the context under consideration, namely a region that is characterized not only by linguistic and cultural diversity but also by its connection to its roots and traditions, certain ambivalences related to these features are evident. Such ambivalences are reflected in the outcomes of this research: students espouse values such as security, that are linked with the conservation of the traditions to which they belong. Moreover, ambivalences emerged between theory and practice that are typical of the profession. At this point, it is still worth remembering – as Baldacci (2019) points out – that theory without practice is empty, but practice without theory is equally blind.

The results of this study have implications for teacher recruitment, education, and retention. As the UN council conclusions on effective teacher education (European Commission, 2014) emphasized, the provision of high-quality initial teacher education is a significant factor in ensuring that suitable candidates are attracted into the teaching profession and that they continue to develop the relevant competencies for teaching in today's classrooms. The question arises of what characteristics and competencies prospective teachers should already have acquired before entering the program of study. First of all, students will need open-mindedness to enable them as teachers to take an appropriate and balanced approach to the increasing diversity in classrooms and societies. In this regard, teacher education should also reflect the diversity in schools and efforts thus have to be made to recruit a more diverse student body (Gross & Atanasoska, forthcoming). Teacher education should not only provide student teachers with the core competencies necessary to ensure high-quality teaching – for example, digital literacy, learning to learn, entrepreneurship, language skills, the ability to support diverse groups of learners, and creative and critical thinking – but also motivate them – which means that prospective teachers' interests and expectations will play an essential role. A move toward a learnfare model of education (Margiotta, 2012) thus seems pertinent in this context, in order to center attention on the competencies and capabilities of individuals. A learnfare model of education could also encourage aspiring teachers to focus on their own personal and professional development rather than on the degree they are striving for.

As Orefice (2015, p. 46) points out, the establishment of a knowledge-based society and an advanced economy in Europe requires the professions to be compatible, and of equivalent quality, across Europe; and there can be no doubt that the route to excellence, competitiveness, inclusion, solidarity, advanced citizenship and innovative professionalism will be mapped on the basis of the foundations of human knowledge, namely competencies, and not qualifications.

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[4] The hidden curriculum of an educational institution transmits attitudes, values, principles, and habitus in an indirect way. Dewey referred to "collateral learning" as early as 1938, and the concept subsequently became known as the "hidden curriculum" and was defined by Jackson (Bellatalla & Pennacchini, 2019). These latent processes of socialization are not restricted to compulsory schooling but are also found in higher education (see e.g. Margolis, 2004).

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