Training and Professional Identity of Educators and Educationlists. A question of "Perspectives"

Formazione e identità professionale degli educatori e dei pedagogisti. Una questione di "prospettive"

Pascal Perillo
Ricercatore di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa - Napoli

abstract

A certain interpretation of the relationship between the flexibility of educational work and the precariousness of educational services results in a social and cultural weakness in the educational professions. This weakness affects the processes of developing professional identity and, therefore, educational practices. The complexity of the educational process requires the training of educators and educationalists who are able to handle the problematic nature of educational work through a heuristic competence that supports the development of professional identity. This proposal is viewed within the framework of interpreting the practicing educational profession as a form of "transformative learning".

Keywords: *education, flexibility, transformative learning*

Una certa lettura del rapporto fra flessibilità del lavoro educativo e precarizzazione dei servizi educativi genera una debolezza sociale e culturale delle professioni educative che incide sui processi di sviluppo dell'identità professionale e, quindi, delle pratiche educative. Considerando l'inevitabile complessità dei processi educativi e formativi, si sottolinea la necessità di formare educatori e pedagogisti che siano capaci di gestire la problematicità insita nel lavoro educativo grazie ad una competenza euristica che supporti lo sviluppo dell'identità professionale, nella prospettiva di interpretare l'esercizio della professione educativo-formativa come forma di "apprendimento trasformativo".

Parole chiave: educazione, flessibilità, apprendimento trasformativo

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1. The principle of flexibility and job insecurity in educational work: against the fragmentation of the educational system

The educational field is among the types of work that involve the most flexibility and precariousness, both of which without a doubt represent the main constitutive elements of professional educational practice. Educators and educationalists exercise professional practice in different and heterogeneous environments that are characterized by a series of problems, variability, and incompleteness. It is not by chance that these individuals are asked to carryout their work with versatility, be ready for changes with only short notice, take risks, and not rely too much on regulations, protocols, and excessively formal procedures.

The situational nature of educational practice (cfr. Corbi, Perillo, 2014) requires the educator and educationalist to calibrate his or her choices of action according to the specific situation. In this regard, Baldaccirefers to a "criterion of adherence to reality" of a given educational choice. He claims that in order to achieve this "calibration," it is necessary to have "not only a tacit understanding of the situation through direct experience [...] but also an awareness of its historical and psychosocial profile, [rendering] an intellectual analysis necessary, according to the Deweyean line of thought" (Baldacci, 2012, p. 292). In terms of educational practice, we therefore must recognize that "educational reality lends itself as something against which the educator slams her face in the course of her praxis" (Baldacci, 2013, p. 83). It is precisely because of this clash with reality that problems and difficulties come about in the educational setting. Accordingly, it is necessary to consciously confront problems associated with historical and cultural situations that may make the educational reality a problematic situation. In this way, if we think about education as a professional practice, we have no choice but to refer to the idea of education as experience (cfr. Dewey, 1949), which asks us to place categories and applications related to the word "education" within the scientific framework of pedagogy as knowledge that is developed in practice. Therefore, we are positioning educational actions within the "transaction"

(Dewey, Bentley, 1974) of me-you world according to a transactional educational approach (cfr. Perillo, 2014a), which guides the reflection proposed in the following pages.

For many years, a non-scientific and instrumental reading of educational activity has lent support to an increasingly precarious working situation for people in the field. This precariousness is related to an unclear association between the principle of problematicity and a certain understanding of the principle of flexibility. "Flexibility is used today as another way to lift the curse of oppression from capitalism. In attacking rigid bureaucracy and emphasizing risk, it is claimed, flexibility gives people more freedom to shape their lives. In fact, the new order substitutes new controls rather than simply abolishing the rules of the past – but these new controls are also hard to understand" (Sennett, 1998, p. 9-10).

As Sennett emphasizes, the most significant aspect of flexibility is that it generates more confusion insofar as it affects the character of singular individuals. According to Sennett, character "particularly focuses upon the long-term aspect of our emotional experience" and "is expressed by loyalty and mutual commitment, or through the pursuit of long-term goals, or by the practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end" (*Ibidem*).

The complexity of the educational process, which for this very reason requires professional rigor, has in this way been interpreted as work precariousness, particularly with the relative decrease in this free service to citizens and with the widespread diffusion of so-called flexible forms of contracts. Therefore, among educators and educationalists, work flexibility is a consolidated reality that distinguishes the entire not formal educational system. Consequently, educational services and, as a result, education job opportunities, have been put in danger, and, accordingly, the professional figure of the educator has been weakened. In the face of fragmented healthcare, social policies on which we invest less and less, and a system of financing that is out of services, the principle of continuity is clearly compromised. This principal is of course indispensable for the realization of the educational process. It also has a significant negative impact on the biographies of professionals, as well as on the use of educational services that can be defined as "intermittent".

On the one hand, a certain decline in flexibility lends itself to an enhancement of the availability of work opportunities for educators and educationalists. However, on the other hand, the now established tendency not to protect these professionals in a systematic manner has negatively fueled the perception of precariousness. In fact, while it is true that educational work is configured as a multidimensional universe – an aspect that

makes it interesting and engaging but, at the same time, difficult to manage – the tendency referred to above translates in practice (and paradoxically) to limited access to work. This is indeed the experience that our graduates have regarding flexibility, which often impedes them from being able to live off the positive and emancipatory figure within the structural uncertainty (cfr. Tramma, 2008) of educational work. In some regional contexts, educational services are not guaranteed in their temporal continuity. This condition raises three problems: (1) reduced employment opportunities; (2) lack of responses to education and training calls for application in the use of educational services; and (3) the relative impossibility of contributing to the necessary consolidation of an educative culture in our society that still maintains a climate of poor attention and socio-cultural recognition to professionals in education. What has been considered thus far is also reflected in a certain understanding of the training/development of educators and educationalists that conveys visions heavily mortgaged by performance and technical approaches that do nothing but increase the risk of professional fragmentation.

2. The training of education professionals: heuristic professionalism and educational practice

The differentiation between three-year training courses (for educators) and two-year training courses (for educationalists) is the result of the implementation of the directives established in the Bologna Process, particularly with Decreto 22 ottobre 2004, n. 270 (Modifiche al regolamento recante norme concernenti l'autonomia didattica degli atenei, approvato con decreto del Ministro dell'università e della ricerca scientifica e tecnologica 3 novembre 1999, n. 509). This difference in course lengths has helped render explicit the differences between the educator and educationalist on a larger scale. It has contributed to the development of a clearer understanding and institutionalization of the distinctions between the educator and educationalist in terms of the activities associated with each such role and, therefore, their respective function. The educator has the direct responsibility of educational intervention, the educationalist is the one who designs, plans, monitors, and evaluates educational and training services; effects complex training interventions; and plays a key role in educational counseling at the individual, family, group, and community level.

The reform of the university system currently in place, despite its limitations, has offered some legislative and organizational tools that have once again allowed for the specificity of the two professional figures, with

of course the need to think about differentiated training paths in terms of purposes, objectives, content, methodologies, and professional opportunities. Nevertheless, the transition from a four-year degree to a three-year degree + two-year degree has opened up further space for uncertainty and ambiguity regarding professional regulation. There are various critical issues that come to our attention, only some of which are reportedhere.

The various proposed declarations in official documents (timetables of courses in the degree program, regulations for recruitment in various sectors, calls for application, etc.) do not always define the professional figure with clarity. In fact, they limit its scope and levels of activity with respect to other professional figures.

The ISAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) codes of professions reveal, on the one hand, a proliferation of information that generates ambiguity and confusion in the definition of professional environments. However, on the other hand, they reveal an absence of specific categories and professional unity that can account for the nature, level, and scope of the professional activity. Consequently, there is significant ambiguity and inconsistencies in the codes of professions and in the training objectives and professional opportunities available after the degree programs.

Considering the issue of courses of study necessarily leads to the emergence of the necessity to guarantee coherence across training profiles, declared professional opportunities, and analytical categories corresponding to the fields and levels of the profession. In this regard, it is necessary to take into account the consistencies and inconsistences within the singular declarations of the courses and within the names of singular degree programs. If descriptions of the degree programs give rise to role expectations (level of the profession) and placement in sectors (scope of the profession) that are indeed of other professions, it may contribute to the further weakening of the not formal education sector.

Each of these aspects contributes, to a different extent, to the weakening of the profession of educator and educationalist, adversely affecting the policies enacted to ensure proper professional placement[1].

It "become educators" (Xodo, 2005) through an intense continuous training that refers to culture, professionalism, and responsibility of who decides to engage in this profession. Therefore, the university Depart-

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1 From this point of view, there is certainly no lack of studies and research that have been going on for years in the Italian pedagogical community. The review of sector studies is particularly wide and significant. Some of these studies are reported in the Bibliography.

ments/Faculties that host the degree programs for the training of educators and educationalists are committed to providing training courses that are strongly centered on experience and interaction with the professional world. As is well known, this pedagogical approach is aimed at enhancing the dialogue between academic knowledge and knowledge expressed in the world of practice, which is reflected in the proposal for a diverse landscape of organized experiences in collaboration with professional activities in various educational contexts.

For example, the immersion of the education student in the world of practice, realized mainly through internships, raises the question of the relationship between professional training and identity. It imposes the need to train educators and educationalists to adopt a systematic view that allows them to "think of themselves as educators" (Perillo, 2012), assuming any description and interpretation of reality as partial and never definitive, but not, accordingly, void of meaning. Additionally, they must avoid a scenario in which processing and elaborating their experience crystallizes a unity of rigid knowledge. After all, the complexity of the field of action of the educational act requires an understanding of experience and of contingency. If educational practice is to be considered within and beyond the real, the educator and educationalist cannot renounce the "discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence" (Dewey, 1916, p. 139).

Contributing to the training of education professionals who are capable of designing and managing the processes of educational change could mean working towards the development of a "meta" competence that is expressed in terms of a heuristic competence. This "meta" competence is fueled by direct, real, and constant knowledge within the varying organizations in which the practice of professional education is exercised. This competence also benefits from a rigorous monitoring of the dynamics of experiential learning that affect the processes of development and the transformation of professional identity.

Thus, regarding the training of professionals in education, the proposal is to adopt the epistemological and methodological frameworks laid out in the paradigm of epistemology of professional practice (cfr. Schön, 1983), enhancing the apparatus of "reflectivity" (Dewey, 1916, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987; Striano, 2001) as a tool to support the development of professional identity. This proposal is viewed within the perspective of interpreting the practicing educational profession as a form of "transformative learning"(Mezirow, 1991, 2016): a form of adult learning that may also relate to working contexts and that presents itself as a series of different "Communities of Practice" (CoP) (cfr. Wenger, 2000, 2006; Wenger, Mc-

Dermott, Snyder, 2007; Fabbri, 2007). To the extent that a regulative structure of pedagogical knowledge is possible, the paradigmatic intertwining that emerges from then counter between these perspectives refers to the transactional principle, which, serving as a genuine demonstration of "inquiry" (cfr. Dewey, 1973), invites us to think about a profession for which it is possible to be trained using a research-training system (cfr. Perillo, 2014b). Of course, in this framework of professional training, it is necessary to consider educators and educationalists as objects and subjects of pedagogical research as part of a constant dialogue between educational research and professional practice (cfr. Grange, 2014).

Thus, in this way, professional training becomes a precious opportunity for transformation that, as such, requires the continuous exercise of an internal heuristic tension. Consequently, according to a form of practical rationality constitutive of pedagogical knowledge, it is fundamental to design and enact training courses, investigate the overall process, and observe the variables at play during the development of transformative activities, all with a view to determine any eventual problems and to monitor the epistemological and methodological system that has been adopted.

Professionalizing educational practice in terms of research means allowing educators and educationalists in training to exercise a *forma mentis* to understand that educational action is both "thoughtful action" and "thought in action". Arriving at this understanding will enable the educator and the educationalist to combine the cognitive moment, which aims to produce knowledge about a given educational reality, with the active moment of action, which aims to achieve a suitable educational intervention plan. This results in the need for educators and educationalists to be trained in the method of action research, which consists of qualitative empirical research that proceeds by reinforcing diagnoses developed by a constant investigation that confers "an effective practical capacity" on to the thought and action of the professional (Baldacci, 2001, p. 141)[2]. Engaging in research about their own professional practice allows the professional in education to renew their knowledge and skills in light of ever-new concepts of pedagogical theorization, such as educational design strategies emerging from reflection in practice.

The programs and courses currently being proposed by Italian universities for the training of educators and educationalists appropriately take

2   For a review of the minimal references adopted here on the subject of action research, see the Bibliography.

under consideration the need to ensure the right balance between general knowledge, practical knowledge, and access to workshops and internships. This system has been criticized by narrow-minded visions that denounce its supposed excessive generic nature and that ignore the epistemological and professional nature of education, as they are too "formatted" by astral forms of technical rationality. It, however, tends to guarantee the possession of heuristic competencies that cultivate theoretical knowledge through constant critical feedback about practical knowledge and its reference points in the action of educators and of educationalists.

The aim pursued here within is to offer to future educators and educationalists the possibility to refine their reflective view in order to learn to coevolve with both the situations in which they are involved as students and those in which they will be involved as professionals. Thus, in practice, educators and educationalists are epistemic agents, committed to building and experimenting with a new repertoire of action. Beyond their practical experiences, these individuals also engage in an ongoing dialogue with themselves in spaces of reflection where it is possible to present and review the varying schemes and "meaning perspectives", including instances, motivations, and premises underlying different forms of imagination, interpretation, and exercise of the professional role, which in turn are generated and/or transformed from actual practice.

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