

A RESEARCH-ACTION EXPERIENCE WITH FUTURE TEACHERS: REFLECTIVENESS TO ENCOURAGE THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES IN AN INCLUSIVE KEY

UN'ESPERIENZA DI RICERCA-AZIONE CON I FUTURI INSEGNANTI: RIFLESSIVITÀ PER INCORAGGIARE L'USO DELLE TECNOLOGIE IN CHIAVE INCLUSIVA

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Abstract

The term reflexivity refers to the conscious action of the teacher to cope with the complexity of educational and didactic systems. Reflexivity if promoted during the initial training period can have benefits on teachers' future teaching action. In fact, fostering reflexive practices could prove useful in navigating the complex universe of teaching interaction and fostering inclusion for all. Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to show the results of an action research experience carried out on the theme of reflexivity in the training of future teachers.

Con il termine riflessività si indica l'azione consapevole del docente a fronteggiare la complessità dei sistemi educativi e didattici. La riflessività se promossa durante il periodo di formazione iniziale può avere dei benefici sulla futura azione didattica dei docenti. Infatti, favorire pratiche riflessive potrebbe rivelarsi utile a navigare il complesso universo dell'interazione didattica e a favorire l'inclusione di tutti. Pertanto, scopo di questo contributo è mostrare i risultati di un'esperienza di ricerca azione svolta sul tema della riflessività, nei percorsi formativi dei futuri docenti.

Keywords

Reflexivity; future teachers; inclusion.
Riflessività; futuri insegnanti; inclusione.

¹ The abstract is to be attributed to Lucia Campitiello. Amelia Lecce is the corresponding author of the article and Stefano Di Tore is the scientific head of the research.

Introduction

The knowledge society requires attention to training as a fundamental moment of professional practice and leads to a systemic redefinition of strategic assets for the construction of professional processes. The teacher today, in fact, operates in a complex and multidimensional society that requires the mobilisation of transversal, as well as disciplinary, competences.

The recent debate involving teacher training focuses on the development of reflexive thinking, which could prove useful in navigating the universe of didactic interaction (Sibilio, 2020) and consciously acting “in action”. The term reflexivity, in education, indicates the awareness to ‘act’ in the face of the complexity of the educational situation (Schön, 1987; Schön, 1993). Therefore, the aim of this contribution is to show the results of a reflexive activity, carried out during a didactic workshop of the Teaching Technologies for Learning course (A.A. 2021-2022), in the 24 cfu course.

The 24 University Training Credits, regulated by Legislative Decree no. 59 of 13 April 2017, are curricular, additional or extra-curricular university examinations in the anthroposophical-psycho-pedagogical disciplines and in teaching methodologies and technologies, required as a prerequisite for taking part in competitions in secondary schools and valid for inclusion in the third tier of the academic rankings.

It is specified that the pathway does not currently provide for laboratory or internship activities, but the legislation provides for a three-year initial training pathway, called FIT, reserved for competition winners (Legislative Decree no. 59 of 13 April 2017, art. 2b).

In contrast, Law No. 79 of 29 June 2022 ‘Reform of initial and continuous training and teacher recruitment’, provides for the introduction of 60 CFU/CFA, in the form of both internships (24 CFU/CFA) and lectures and workshops (36 CFU/CFA). Specifically, the teaching placement will be supervised, aimed at developing observational, self-observational and reflective skills in educational contexts.

Starting from these premises, the aim of the following article is to present an action research conducted with students in teacher training, the results of which outline a profile not yet ready to promote the values of an inclusive school.

The importance of reflexivity in teacher action

Reflexivity is a construct explored in depth by theories of action and theories investigating teacher education, which are increasingly in need of acquiring new skills and charting new research paths (Schön, 1987; Schön, 1993). Reflective practice, during the period of initial and continuous training, is configured as a vector “capable of raising the level of competence, autonomy and responsibility of each individual” (Nuzzaci, 2011, p. 11).

Reflexivity, therefore, indicates the characteristic of a process that is capable of understanding and giving meaning to an experience, making it, in fact, meaningful (Mezirow, 2003). The teacher, as a reflective practitioner, should be able to interpret and reinterpret his or her own experience and constantly improve his or her competence (Schön, 1987; Schön, 1993).

In fact, reflective practice could positively influence practices to transform actions into permanent attitudes, mobilising prior experience and formalising theories into action (Altet, 1994; Perrenoud, 1994; Schön, 1993).

Three conceptual declinations of reflexivity have been borrowed in didactics:

- reflexivity in didactics - starts from the studies of Dewey, who identifies reflexivity as a relevant stage in the process of understanding educational action, identifying a retrospective look at what has been done and a prospective look at what is to be done. It is therefore knowledge not only after the action but before and during the action.

- didactic reflexivity - understood as the device of choice for theoretical thinking, in view of a subsequent formalisation of practices
- didactics of reflexivity - referring to reflexive practice, i.e. the set of methodologies that assume reflexivity as a mediator between knowledge and experience. The most important developments in the didactics of reflexivity are the reflexive models for teacher professional development (Bertagna, Triani, 2013, p. 383).

Reflexivity, therefore, is configured as a necessary practice “for teachers who want to understand the complex nature of the classroom and who intend to solve problems related to teaching practice, starting precisely from questioning the knowledge process and the role of personal experience” (Zeichner, Liston, 1996 in Crotti, 2017, p.89).

Description of the reflective experience participants

A group of about 70 students enrolled in the Bachelor’s and Master’s degree courses of the Department of Science and Technology, Department of Law, Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods Economics, Department of Engineering of the University of Sannio took part in the workshop.

Procedure

The research was carried out during the 24-credit course Teaching Technologies for Inclusion. The course involves the acquisition of 6cfu for a total of 30 hours of frontal lectures, carried out in blended mode. In order to stimulate students’ reflective ability, a questionnaire was shared on a Google Forms platform. The answers provided by the students were subsequently discussed in class and the positive aspects of the group’s opinions were brought out, enabling the lecturer to direct teaching consistent with the group’s actual training needs.

Instruments

Specifically, they were asked to read J.’s case study from the ICF-CY and answer open-ended questions, which were then categorised and labelled. The questions presented to the students were taken from a 1993 study by Smith. In this study, Smyth provides background information on the emergence of reflexivity as a conceptual drive for teachers.

Smyth states that in order to investigate the forces that inhibit and limit teaching action, teachers need to ‘train’ four forms of action. These ‘forms’ are characterised by four sequential steps and are linked to a series of questions:

- description of the behaviour - i.e. what do I do?
- Information about the problem from other points of view - i.e. what does it mean?
- Confrontation with other professionals on how it came to be that way;
- Reconstruction - i.e. how could I do things differently?

Based on this suggestion, the group of students was asked to read the case study of J. taken from the International Classification of Functioning, Youth and Health (2007):

J. is a 14-year-old girl (...). She has a severe form of asthma (...). Her school attendance has been characterised by many absences. As a result, her school results have been consistently poor (...). Currently, he attends the third year of secondary school. Since exercise triggers acute episodes (...) he does not do any regular physical activity. She is often absent from school and stays at home where she watches television and eats snacks (...) she has not

created a stable group of friends at school. J. reports feeling different from others and isolated from her classmates. Her parents are becoming very concerned about her physical and emotional health.

Results

In the first question (see Figure 1. Description of the situation), Description of J.'s situation, the answers were labelled in two ways:

- attribution of the lack of participation to environmental factors (thus to external causes) 17%.
- attribution of the lack of participation to bodily functions and structures (thus to internal causes) 83%.

The reflexive activity presented does not return a positive picture of the trainees' perceptions with respect to inclusive issues, in fact, when asked to describe the situation of J.'s case, a view of impairment, understood as "loss or abnormality of a psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function", typical of the ICIDH (International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps), a document drawn up by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1980), clearly emerges. In fact, the most frequent answers to this question were:

- "The girl has learning difficulties due to a health problem";
- "The girl suffers from asthma".



Figure 1. Description of the situation

In the second question (see Figure 2. What other figures could intervene in order to promote participation), What other figures could intervene in order to involve J. to participate in school life situations:

- a very high percentage, that of 67%, states that medical-healthcare figures should intervene - this answer could be interpreted as mirroring a medical interpretation of disability which sees disability as a characteristic intrinsic to the person based on a medical approach, defining disability as a bodily, psychic or mental deficit which affects a person, limiting his or her social participation. The medical model of disability is the expression of a causal and linear logic that assesses the deficit quantitatively and considers it as a structural problem of the individual, with obvious repercussions on his or her social role (Sibilio, 2003).
- 31% believe that the support teacher should intervene;
- 2% of students believe that socio-educational figures, together with support teachers, could improve J.'s social participation.

The most frequent answers to this question were:

- “the figure who should intervene is the family doctor who has been following her for a long time and knows the situation, a specialist doctor regarding her problem, a nutritionist, a physiotherapist/coach, qualified teachers, a psychologist”
- “the confrontation that there should be, is especially between parents teacher and doctor so that J. can have a better plan both in terms of interaction and education”.

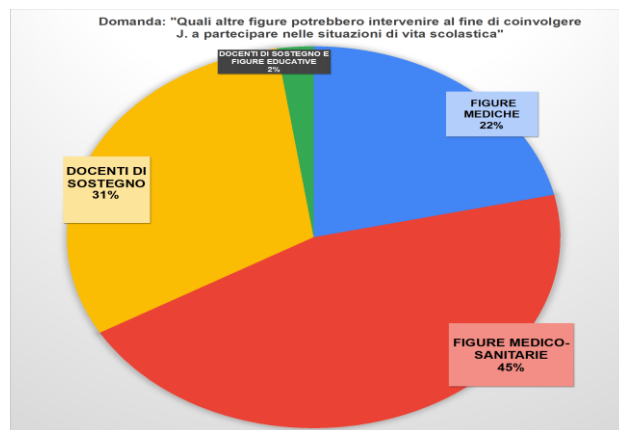


Figure 2. What other figures could intervene to promote participation

In the third question (see Figure 3. Restructuring the action), How would you restructure the action to foster J.'s participation:

- 56 % answer that they would like to structure inclusive teaching activities such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring;
- 32% to promote working groups composed of psychologists-doctor teachers;
- 12% wanted to use educational products and technologies.

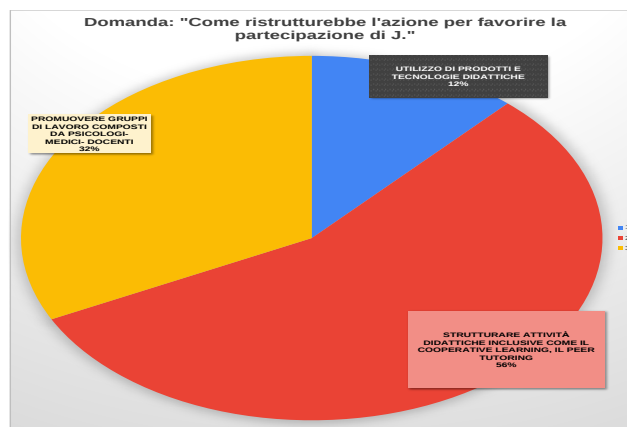


Figure 3. Restructuring of the action

In the fourth question (see Figure 4. Restructuring the action with technologies), How would you restructure the action using educational products and technologies:

- 40% state that they would like to use distance learning;
- 34% state that they would like to use digital tools during distance learning that allow greater interaction, through active learning tools;
- 26%, on the other hand, would not know what to use.

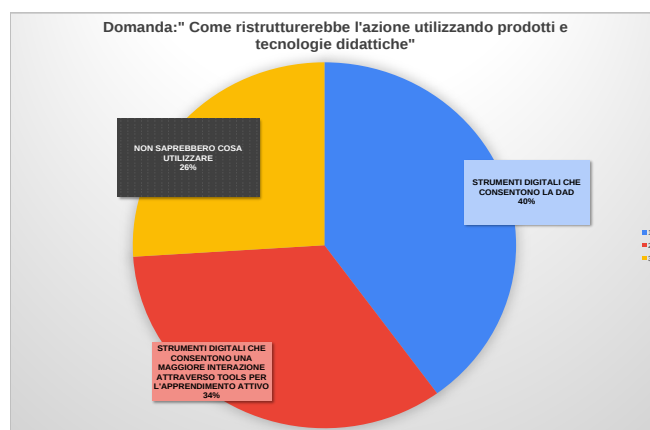


Figure 4. Restructuring the action with technologies

Discussions and conclusions

In 1973, Edgar Shein stated that there are three components of professional knowledge:

- “A basic disciplinary component or basic science, on which the practice of the profession is based or from which it develops.
- An applied science component from which many of the diagnostic procedures and solutions to everyday problems are derived.
- A component of expertise and aptitude, which relates to the actual provision of services to the client, through the use of the underlying basic and applied knowledge” (Schein, 1973, p.43).

Therefore, it appears necessary to promote - in addition to disciplinary competences - social and transversal competences in teachers to enable them to “develop a collaborative culture within schools and improve self-confidence in their professional relationships with colleagues and students” (European Commission Eurydice, 2021, p. 31).

The reflective activity, carried out with students in training, revealed gaps in the knowledge needed to realise inclusive and welcoming communities (see figure 1 and figure 2). In fact, considering disability as a lack or deficit is an expression of a linear model of teaching that is no longer effective in interpreting the complexity of school reality. On the contrary, the teacher today is required to know how to navigate didactic complexity “mobilising all the resources at his or her disposal and resorting to an organisation of teaching activities that is flexible and non-linear, i.e. capable of taking into account all the transpositional and interaction potentialities proper to the teaching-learning process in relation to the needs of all students” (Di Gennaro, Aiello, Zollo, Sibilio, 2018). The gaps that emerged, however, cannot be read as definitive since teachers’ professional competence is a set of processes that incorporate knowledge, skills, attitudes (European Commission Eurydice, 2021), professional training

(and motivational aspects), comparison and exchange among colleagues, contextual constraints and opportunities (Oggionni, 2019). The European Commission's guide also emphasises that "becoming a teacher is a gradual process comprising initial teacher training, induction into the profession and continuing professional development" (European Commission, 2010, p. 9).

In the third (Restructuring the action) and fourth question (Restructuring the action using educational products and technologies) it emerges that the students answer in line and coherently with the topics covered during the course hours, i.e.: to restructure the action it is necessary to adopt cooperative strategies such as Peer Tutoring, or to promote learning through Cooperative Learning. It also shows that the majority of students are aware that the correct application of cooperative learning leads to positive interdependence and raises levels of awareness and self-determination for the whole class (Cottini, 2017).

The image returned by this preliminary investigation is the translation of a conception of disability understood as labelling, i.e. as a dichotomy between "normal abilities" and "lack of normal abilities". As a matter of fact, history tells us that social labels have contributed to categorising people with disabilities and have made it possible to validate a vision of "diversity" that distances itself from "normality" as a socially accepted form (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Medeghini et al, 2013).

Therefore, in agreement with national policy makers, the urgency of promoting educational pathways, both initial and in-service, suitable for responding effectively to the new educational emergencies and complexities is emphasised, first and foremost that of combating all forms of 'ableism' that perpetuate forms of social inequality (Dirth, Branscombe, 2018).

Eurydice Italy's 2021 report "Teachers in Europe: careers, professional development and well-being" states that "initial teacher education is a starting point in this continuous process of professional development and the way it is organised is fundamental in determining both the quality and quantity of teachers" (European Commission Eurydice, 2021, p. 93). In this framework, the NRP - Next Generation EU, with its Reform 2.2 "School of Higher Education and compulsory training of school leaders, teachers and technical-administrative staff"- proposes a stable structure of pedagogical and didactic training that allows the acquisition during initial and in-service training of disciplinary, digital and transversal competences in order to promote innovative and inclusive didactics.

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