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Sustaining Engagement and Agency in the Practicum: A Tutor Coordinator's Perspective on Scaffolding, Feedback and Authentic Tasks in Italian Teacher Certification Pathways

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Abstract: Background: Italian teacher certification pathways combine telematic coursework with an in-person practicum, yet the tutor coordinator who holds large trainee cohorts together has received little research attention compared with the mentor–trainee dyad. This paper asks which coordination-level design choices appear to sustain trainees' engagement and emerging professional agency. Methods: a practitioner case study was developed from the author's structured field notes, session logs, end-of-activity trainee feedback and institutional reports collected across one practicum cycle, and analysed thematically. Results: three patterns emerged. Trainees engaged more consistently when the mandatory practicum documents (logbook , internship report and e-portfolio) were connected to professionally recognisable problems; a recurring, dialogic feedback cycle was associated with less passive participation and more trainee-initiated questions; and visible, regular relational scaffolding was named by trainees as the main counterweight to fragmentation. Conclusions: agency appeared to depend on conditions set upstream of the mentoring dyad. The account is interpretive and drawn from one coordinator's practice, and it points to coordination-level design as a line of inquiry that deserves systematic study.

Keywords: teacher agency; practicum engagement; tutor coordination; initial teacher education; feedback

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1. Introduction

Italian initial teacher education has been reorganised around certification pathways (*percorsi abilitanti*) regulated by the Prime Ministerial Decree of 4 August 2023 and by Legislative Decree 59/2017, as amended. These pathways combine academic coursework, delivered largely through telematic and blended formats, with a structured practicum (*tirocinio*). The practicum is carried out in presence, in schools (*tirocinio diretto*) and in activities organised by the university (*tirocinio indiretto*). Cohorts are large and geographically dispersed, and many trainees are already working professionals. This model widens access and flexibility but sharpens tensions that the SIREM 2026 conference on engagement in education invites us to examine: participation can turn into compliance, tasks can be lived as bureaucratic requirements instead of meaningful professional experiences, and the sense of belonging to a learning community can be diluted by distance and by the sheer size of the group.

The international literature describes the practicum as an experience of ambivalence, in which enthusiasm for teaching coexists with fear and uncertainty. Trainees have to make sense of guidance that comes from school mentors, school leaders

and university educators and that is often fragmented or contradictory, while they build a professional identity (Heinz, 2024). Research has long concentrated on the mentor–trainee relationship; more recent work also considers the educators who support trainees and face their own pedagogical, interpersonal and emotional difficulties in handling several roles (Heinz, 2024). Between the university, the school mentors and the trainees stands a figure that this literature has scarcely examined: the tutor coordinator, who designs, monitors and holds together the practicum experience of large groups of trainees. Many of the structural conditions for engagement are decided at this level, before any single mentoring conversation takes place. They include how tasks are framed, how feedback is organised and what kind of relational fabric the group develops. The stakes go beyond pedagogy. Heinz (2024) links the continued study of the practicum to rising rates of teachers leaving the profession and to the UNESCO estimate that 44 million new teachers will be needed by 2030 to achieved universal primary and secondary education (UNESCO, 2024, as cited in Heinz, 2024). Understanding what keeps trainees engaged during the practicum is therefore also a question about how the profession is renewed.

A further feature of the Italian pathways is that trainees must produce a fixed set of documents: a logbook (*diario di bordo*), a final internship report (*relazione di tirocinio*) and an e-portfolio. Their existence is not negotiable; what remains open is the meaning trainees attribute to them. They can be completed as administrative proof that hours have been done, or become tools for examining one's own practice. The design question for the coordinator is therefore not which documents to assign, but how to help trainees find real professional meaning in documents they have to produce anyway.

This paper presents a practice-based case study developed from the author's direct experience as tutor coordinator in an Italian teacher certification programme. It asks which design choices at the coordination level appeared to sustain trainees' cognitive, emotional and social engagement, and to support their emerging professional agency, across one full cycle of practicum. The paper has two aims: to describe a set of coordination-level practices adopted to counter fragmentation and passive compliance in a large-scale, partly telematic pathway, and to reflect critically on their perceived effects, in order to derive tentative design principles for tutor coordinators working in comparable contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Engagement as a Situated Construct

In this paper engagement is treated as a multidimensional and situated construct. It results from the interplay of practices, tools and relationships, and it is not a fixed trait of the individual learner.

Fan et al. (2024) frame engagement in the practicum through the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974, as cited in Fan et al., 2024). According to this model, external stimuli act on an individual's cognitive and affective states, which are the organism, and these states in turn shape behavioural responses. Applied to the practicum, the authors treat the teacher support and peer support that trainees perceive as stimuli, perseverance and interest in language teaching (L2 grit) and enjoyment of teaching as the organism, and work engagement as the response.

The study offers a useful, if partial, reference point. It examined work engagement, understood as vigour, dedication and absorption, among 516 fourth-year preservice English teachers in China who had just completed a practicum of at least six months. In their structural model, the support received from mentor teachers predicted work engagement directly. Peer support did not have a significant direct effect, but both kinds of support influenced engagement indirectly, through the trainees' perseverance and interest in teaching and through their enjoyment of teaching. The authors attribute the missing direct effect of peers to trainees being spread across many schools, which limits communication, and recommend regular meetings. Transfer to the Italian setting calls for caution: the study is cross-sectional, relies on self-report and a convenience sample, concerns language teaching in a different system, and measures support from school mentors, not from a coordinator. Here it is used as an indication that support structures matter and that dispersion across schools is a risk to be addressed by design. Its effect sizes are not assumed to hold. The S-O-R logic is borrowed only as a heuristic: coordination-level conditions can be read as stimuli offered by the practicum environment, and the sense of purpose, belonging and motivation that trainees report as the states through which engagement is shaped. The model is not tested.

2.2. Teacher Agency as an Ecological Achievement

Teacher agency is approached through the ecological perspective proposed by Priestley et al. (2015). In this view agency is something that actors achieve in particular situations, and it does not coincide with a personal disposition. It arises from the interplay of individual capacities and of the material, cultural and structural conditions in which people act. The perspective is well suited to trainee teachers, who act within strong constraints: a regulated set of documents, a required number of hours, host schools that have their own routines, and a status that does not yet allow autonomous didactic decisions. A coordinator's design choices can widen or narrow the room for action within those constraints. The working question is which conditions allow trainees to propose, adapt and take initiative, and which reduce them to executing prescribed activities.

2.3. Feedback, Observation and Reflection in the Practicum

Recent practicum research points to the quality of relationships and of feedback, more than to the simple accumulation of supervised hours. Jenssen and Haara (2024) analysed focus groups with 27 Norwegian student teachers and found that, in their accounts, a high-quality practicum depends on social and professional inclusion in the school community and on mentors who know the content of the programme and who combine clear expectations with space for experimentation and reflection. The study also reports considerable variability in mentoring quality. Heinz (2024) places such findings in a broader shift from university-centred models of the practicum towards more equal collaboration between academic and practical knowledge, and recalls that mentoring arrangements and the relationship between theory and practice are long-standing, difficult issues of the field.

Goldshaft (2024) studied a Norwegian school placement in which first-year student teachers used a shared observation tool (see Section 2.4). Two findings are relevant here. First, links between theory studied at university and practice observed in classrooms appeared more clearly in the reflective diaries that students wrote individually at the end of the placement than in the shared working sheets or in oral exchanges. Second, a group whose mentor had added a further reflective task, explicitly asking students to

connect observation and theory, produced diaries with much stronger theoretical references. These results suggest that written reflection does not become meaningful by itself: it needs clear prompts and a sense of purpose, which bears directly on the logbook and the e-portfolio.

2.4. Systematic Observation and the Learning of Noticing

Observing a classroom systematically is a professional skill, and it is learned. Goldshaft (2024) builds on the construct of teacher noticing, the ability to notice relevant interactions in the classroom and to adapt one's teaching accordingly. She adopts the model of Van Es and Sherin (2002, as cited in Goldshaft, 2024), which breaks noticing into three components: identifying what is relevant in a situation, connecting it to pedagogical principles, and reasoning about it. The model suits student teachers because they are not yet authorised to make autonomous didactic decisions in the classroom, so that their task is to observe and interpret.

In the Norwegian programme studied, students were introduced to systematic observation through theoretical courses and a five-day observation placement, and the tool they later used combined lesson planning with a defined focus for observation. Fixing the focus in advance helped them notice relevant interactions and filter out distractions. Goldshaft (2024) concludes, in line with other studies, that noticing can be learned and does not depend simply on years of experience, but on support structures that make explicit what is worth noticing. For the practicum, the implication is that observation cannot be assumed to come with the placement: trainees have to be taught what to observe and how to describe it. This matters for pathways such as the Italian ones, in which observation in schools is a component of the direct practicum and trainees record what they see in documents such as the logbook.

2.5. Working Hypothesis

Taken together, these strands support the working hypothesis that guided the case study: engagement and agency in the practicum are shaped to a considerable extent upstream of the mentor–trainee dyad, by the way the tutor coordinator frames tasks, structures feedback and builds the relational architecture of the trainee cohort. The hypothesis was used as a lens for reading the material, and the study does not test it.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study adopts a practitioner case-study approach. Heinz (2024) calls for more case studies and attention to a wider range of actors in the practicum, and a case written from the coordinator's position is one way of responding. It also carries obvious risks of partiality, discussed in Section 5.3. The coordinator's first-person standpoint is treated as an analytical resource that has to be declared and examined, not as a neutral one.

3.2. Context and Case

The case is situated in an Italian teacher certification pathway that combines indirect practicum activities (seminars, workshops and guided group work) with direct practicum in schools. Trainees are organised in smaller working groups, supervised by a tutor coordinator who works alongside school mentors and the responsible university structures. The academic coursework is delivered at a distance, while the practicum takes place in presence. Trainees are distributed across several schools and many study

while working, so that they are structurally exposed to isolation. They must produce the *diario di bordo*, the *relazione di tirocinio* and the e-portfolio.

3.3. Coordination-Level Design Choices

Three design choices are examined. They concern the organisation of the indirect practicum and the way the coordinator accompanied the trainees through the whole cycle.

The first choice concerned the meaning of tasks and mandatory documents. Because the documents are required, the coordinator's work consisted mainly in framing: each document was introduced by clarifying what it is for professionally, and the workshop tasks of the indirect practicum were designed to supply it with material. Instead of generic reflective exercises, trainees worked on tasks anchored in situations they would meet in schools. Table 1 describes three of them. Two used a structured instrument, a planning sheet and an observation grid, in a short and clearly bounded format. The third asked trainees to produce an institutional document, the minutes of a class council, on cases that teachers find hard to handle.

Table 1. Workshop tasks of the indirect practicum used as examples of authentic tasks.

Task	What trainees did	Professional problem
Designing a lesson from a brief (35–40 min)	Groups received a brief (discipline, school level, topic, pupils with special educational needs) and completed in 25 minutes a planning sheet: objectives, phases and timing, methodology, measures for the two pupils, formative assessment tool. A representative presented the plan (5 min) to an audience acting as an assessment panel; strengths and improvements were collected on a shared board with colour-coded post-its.	Planning for a heterogeneous class and justifying choices before a panel
Peer observation (optional, 30–35 min)	A volunteer taught a 10-minute micro-lesson simulating a real class. Observers used a structured grid (declared objectives, interaction, management of special needs, assessment, non-verbal language), filled it in individually (5 min), compared notes in pairs (8 min) and joined a plenary synthesis introducing reflective documentation as a tool for professional growth.	Observing teaching systematically and describing it before judging it
Class council simulation	Trainees simulated a class council and wrote its minutes, working on critical cases such as a cyberbullying episode and communication with a family that does not want its child assessed for a specific	Handling a sensitive institutional process and its formal record

Task	What trainees did	Professional problem
	learning disorder.	

The second choice concerned feedback. Feedback was organised as a recurring cycle and not as a final evaluative act. During the indirect practicum, brief formative checkpoints were held, oriented towards dialogue and self-assessment. The intention was a feedback culture of the kind that practicum research describes as supporting two-way learning (Heinz, 2024), in which the coordinator also learns from trainees.

The third choice concerned relational and coordinative scaffolding. The coordinator acted as a stable connecting figure among the trainee group, the school mentors and the institution, and deliberately sought to sustain a sense of belonging in a cohort that was distributed and often part-time. This included regular group check-ins, moments of peer exchange modelled on collaborative observation practices (Goldshaft, 2024), and explicit attention to the emotional and motivational side of the transition into the profession. The check-ins also answered the concern raised by Fan et al. (2024) about trainees who are scattered across schools and rarely meet.

3.4. Data and Analysis

The data consist of the coordinator's structured field notes and session logs, collected across a full practicum cycle; the end-of-activity feedback given by trainees; the workshop materials used in the indirect practicum; and the documentation produced for institutional reporting. The material was analysed thematically. The analysis focused on episodes in which engagement or disengagement, and emerging or constrained agency, were visible in participation patterns, in the quality of the tasks produced and in trainees' self-reported reflections. Episodes were grouped by similarity, compared with the three design choices and then read against the literature of Section 2.

The analysis rests on professional records produced in the ordinary course of the coordinator's work. Results are reported in aggregated form, with no information that identifies trainees, schools or mentors. No quantitative measures of engagement were collected. A questionnaire for trainees of a completed practicum cycle has been developed as a next step; its results are not part of this paper (Section 5.3).

4. Results

Three interrelated patterns emerged from the analysis and are described below. The wording is deliberately cautious: the patterns are interpretations of the coordinator's records and are not measured effects.

4.1. Tasks and Documents Connected to Professional Problems

Trainees engaged more consistently, and produced more substantial work, when tasks and documents were explicitly connected to problems that they recognised as professionally real. It points to the importance of task authenticity, as distinct from task quantity, for sustaining motivation. A document appeared to be taken up more seriously

when trainees could see what it would allow them to do or understand, a purpose that the tasks of the indirect practicum helped to make visible. In this sense the coordinator's contribution lay less in assigning something new than in making the purpose of required work visible. This reading is consistent with Goldshaft (2024), where reflective writing produced richer links between theory and practice when it was given an explicit purpose. The peer-observation task, with its grid fixed in advance and its sequence of individual notes, pair comparison and plenary, reflects the defined observation focus discussed in Section 2.4.

4.2. From Single Evaluation Moments to a Dialogic Feedback Cycle

The move from a single, summative evaluation moment to a cycle of short formative checkpoints appeared to reduce passive, purely compliance-oriented participation. It was accompanied by more trainee-initiated questions and more discussion among peers. Feedback design and self-regulated engagement seemed to move closer together: trainees asked for comments while their work was still open to change, and used the checkpoints to compare their situations. This echoes the emphasis Heinz (2024) places on a co-constructed feedback culture and fits Jenssen and Haara's (2024) observation that students value clear expectations combined with room to experiment.

4.3. Relational Scaffolding Against Fragmentation

Trainees themselves repeatedly identified the coordinator's relational scaffolding as the factor that most counteracted the sense of fragmentation linked to distributed, blended delivery. The scaffolding was visible, regular and attentive to the affective side of the transition into teaching, and it appeared to support a form of situated agency: trainees increasingly proposed adaptations to tasks and set up peer-support arrangements on their own initiative, and they did so more often than they simply carried out prescribed activities. This is compatible with the indirect role of peer support reported by Fan et al. (2024), though the mechanisms cannot be shown.

5. Discussion

5.1. Agency as an Accomplishment of Coordination-Level Conditions

The three patterns resonate with, and in a modest way extend, the ecological understanding of agency (Priestley et al., 2015). Agency did not seem to arise from individual disposition alone. It drew on a set of conditions that were put in place at the coordination level and that trainees could then build on: tasks whose purpose was recognisable, feedback that left room to respond, and a relationship with a coordinator and a group that was continuous over time. A trainee who sees the purpose of a document, receives comments while there is still time to act on them and knows that a coordinator and a group are there is more likely to propose an adaptation than to simply execute it.

The case also bears on engagement under datafication and attentional fragmentation: the tutor coordinator holds a strategic, under-theorised position from which these risks can be counterbalanced through task design and relational continuity, without additional monitoring or metrics. This is not an argument against evaluation, but a reminder that the climate in which evaluation happens is itself a product of design.

The relation to the wider literature is one of fit and not of confirmation. Inclusion in a community and clear but flexible expectations (Jenssen & Haara, 2024), a purpose for written reflection (Goldshaft, 2024), a co-constructed feedback culture (Heinz, 2024) and

the risk of isolation when trainees are scattered (Fan et al., 2024) are all compatible with the patterns reported here. None of these studies examined the coordinator, a figure easily overlooked because it works between the levels more often studied.

5.2. Tentative Design Principles

From the three patterns, the following principles are proposed for tutor coordinators working in comparable pathways. They are offered as hypotheses to be tested and refined, and not as recommendations backed by evidence of effectiveness.

- Treat required documents as design material: when a document cannot be dropped, ask what it can be made to do for the trainee, and answer explicitly and early;
- Anchor tasks in problems that trainees recognise as professionally real, and increase autonomy gradually, so that the release of responsibility is visible to them;
- Replace single evaluative moments with a small number of short, recurring checkpoints that invite dialogue and self-assessment while the work can still change;
- Treat observation as a skill to be taught, by indicating what is worth noticing, and give written reflection explicit prompts that connect observation to theory, making clear what the writing is for;
- Build continuity of relationship, through regular check-ins and structured peer exchange, especially where trainees are dispersed across schools or study part-time.

Several principles ask for time and attention, and Goldshaft (2024) found that structured tools can feel burdensome at first, so they should be introduced gradually and explained.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The limitations are considerable and shape how far the conclusions can travel. The account comes from a single coordinator, programme and practicum cycle, and the analysis was conducted by the person who designed and delivered the practices. The risk of confirmation bias is therefore real, and there was no independent coding or triangulation with the views of school mentors. Trainees gave their feedback to the coordinator, whose position may have encouraged favourable comments. No systematic measures of engagement or agency were used, and the patterns cannot be attributed causally to the design choices: the composition of the group or the quality of host schools may have contributed. The case is also tied to the Italian regulatory framework.

Further research could proceed in several directions. The trainee questionnaire mentioned in Section 3.4, which addresses self-efficacy, perceived feedback, group climate and the meaning attributed to the mandatory documents, would allow the interpretive patterns reported here to be examined with a broader base of evidence. Studies that include school mentors, and comparisons across coordinators and programmes, would help to separate the effect of the design from that of the person who implements it. Longitudinal and observational designs, which Heinz (2024) also encourages, could follow trainees beyond the practicum. Heinz (2024) also notes that little is known about how the socio-cultural identities and positioning of students and educators shape the practicum, despite documented difficulties for trainees from underrepresented groups. In pathways where many trainees are already working professionals, this is a clear direction for future studies: they could examine how

differences in background and circumstances, and the positioning of coordinators themselves, affect who engages and who is able to exercise agency. Finally, tutor coordinators would benefit from more attention, in institutions and in research, to the pedagogical and not only administrative dimension of their role.

6. Conclusions

This paper has offered a practice-grounded reflection on how coordination-level choices about task meaning, dialogic feedback and relational scaffolding can sustain engagement and support the emergence of professional agency among trainee teachers in large-scale Italian certification pathways. In the case examined, trainees engaged more when required work was tied to problems they recognised as real, participated less passively when feedback was a recurring dialogue, and reported that continuity of relationship counteracted the fragmentation of a distributed, partly telematic programme. The evidence is interpretive and limited to one coordinator's practice. The paper argues for extending practicum research beyond the mentor–trainee dyad to include the tutor coordinator, and proposes coordination-level design as a promising, under-explored line of inquiry.

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