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Teacher Practice and Artificial Intelligence: An Ecological Reinterpretation Through the Lens of Teacher Agency.

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Abstract: The pervasiveness of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in school contexts brings about profound changes in teaching and learning processes. With particular attention to the qualitative repercussions of this technology on the teaching profession, the present contribution investigates its changes by re-examining the results of two empirical experiences conducted in 2025. These studies involved digital coordinators and teachers from Salesian schools in the Triveneto region, engaged in experimentation activities with AI. Their experiences and perceptions are analyzed here adopting Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's (2015) ecological approach to Teacher Agency as an interpretive lens, in order to capture the agentic tension of teaching practice. The descriptive-interpretive analysis of the empirical corpus, which explores the reciprocal interaction among the iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of teacher agency, reveals a profession strongly called upon to act with dynamism, reflexivity, and intentionality. The challenges posed by AI to educational action, in fact, require defining new orientations for action within evolving school ecologies, capable of simultaneously safeguarding curricular objectives and the holistic development of students. What has emerged highlights the need to adequately support teachers in the development of educational and relational ecosystems that enhance their agency, so that the integration of AI translates into a pedagogically founded growth opportunity for the entire school community.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Teacher Agency; Ecological Approach.

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1. Introduction[1]

The rapid spread of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in school contexts raises significant questions for educational and teaching research, highlighting the need to develop new interpretive frameworks (Ranieri, 2024; Ciasullo, Santoianni & Manfredini, 2026). These frameworks should not be limited to describing the mere performance effectiveness of AI; rather, they must enable the interpretation of transformations within teachers' professional practice and the pedagogical intentionality that guides it. To harness the innovations introduced by AI for the benefit of teaching and learning, it is essential to acquire adequate AI literacy (AI for Education, 2026). This literacy must support teachers in addressing not only the

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technical dimensions but also the pedagogical, critical, and ethical implications of this technology (Ranieri, Cuomo & Biagini, 2024). Alongside the acquisition of knowledge and skills, however, the teacher's intentional and reflective contribution emerges as a fundamentally important dimension (Biesta, 2017). The significant possibilities unlocked by this technology—which offers concrete support for instructional design and classroom teaching (Di Bello, 2023; Lorenzoni, 2024)—indeed require a critical approach. Such an approach is necessary to evaluate and adapt generated content, ensuring that educational offerings truly respond to students' needs (Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2025) and are genuinely aimed at promoting their growth and development (Miao & Cukurova, 2024).

Situated within this scenario is the *Go - Beyond traditional education* project, launched during the 2024/2025 school year with the aim of progressively integrating AI into the teaching profession. The initiative involves approximately 700 in-service teachers from Salesian schools in the Triveneto region in professional development programs, with the goal of actively supporting them through this process of innovation. Specifically, over the past two years, the participating teachers have engaged in targeted training courses and all currently hold an advanced Gemini license.

This contribution, therefore, proposes a critical re-examination of the empirical evidence gathered during this field experiment, adopting the ecological approach to Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015) as an interpretive lens. The perspective offered by this framework appears particularly significant, as it conceptualizes agency not as an individual attribute, but as a phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interplay between individual resources and the structural, relational, and educational conditions of the context. This approach makes it possible to capture the teacher's agentic tension, which can be traced in the choices, orientations, and strategies adopted in daily practice. The analysis therefore explores how the introduction of AI is redefining teachers' epistemic stances and pedagogical commitment within rapidly evolving school ecologies.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative contribution proposes an integrative thematic synthesis of the findings from two previous studies, conducted as part of the *Go – Beyond traditional education* project. The aim is to deepen the understanding of AI integration into the teaching profession, with particular attention to the agentic tensions emerging in instructional design and classroom teaching. The integration of the evidence aims to yield an interpretive advancement beyond the individual studies (Heaton, 2004) by relating the representations of AI and the conditions of its use to the experiences documented by teachers, in light of the theoretical framework of Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015).

The corpus for this synthesis, selected to address this objective, comprises the findings reported in the following contributions:

1) a study based on three exploratory focus groups with digital coordinators, conducted during the first year of the project's experimentation (2024/2025

school year), aimed at identifying representations, expectations, and challenges related to the introduction of AI in the involved schools (Miatto et al., 2026a). Specifically, this study presents the perspective of the digital coordinators, providing a comprehensive overview from individuals who, within the *Go – Beyond traditional education* project, are engaged both in the active experimentation of AI and in facilitating its operational integration within their own schools. By virtue of this role, the digital coordinator provides direct support to colleagues and acts as an intermediary in the progressive implementation of the experimentation. The perspective offered by this figure, therefore, combines personal experience with a systemic vision, intertwining individual experiences, teacher feedback, and the strategic orientations of the school leadership.

2) A study based on the analysis of responses from 563 primary and secondary school teachers (including digital coordinators), collected through the 'Teaching Activity Tracking Form', in which each participant described a practical experience of using AI, reflecting on the role played by the technology in instructional design (Mantoet & Miatto, in press). This second contribution further examines the practices documented by the teachers in instructional design. Specifically, it outlines the practical modalities of AI experimentation, highlighting the underlying objectives, decision-making processes, and specific forms of technological adoption

The two studies share the same project and institutional context, yet they involve participant groups with different roles and employ distinct data collection tools. Both focus on the Salesian schools in the Triveneto region affiliated with the 'San Marco' Salesian Province of Mestre-Venice. During the first year of experimentation, all teachers were required to complete a 15-hour introductory AI training course and to document the ideation and design process of at least one teaching activity that involved the support of, and engagement with, a generative AI tool.

Upon evaluating the characteristics of the involved samples, the specificities of the project context, and the relevance of the educational and pedagogical issues investigated, the two studies were deemed suitable for conducting a secondary analysis (Heaton, 2004) aimed at exploring the agentic shifts within the teaching profession, drawing from concrete field experiences. Specifically, the perspectives offered by these studies regarding the transformations in professional practice effectively address the following research question guiding the analytical phase: 'How does the integrated analysis of the findings from the two studies broaden the understanding of the conditions and agentic tensions characterizing the use of AI in the teaching profession?

The synthesis, therefore, adopts the core themes and interpretations developed in the two studies as its unit of analysis. Consequently, it does not involve a re-analysis of the focus group transcripts or the original forms, but rather a re-examination of the findings through a shared theoretical framework. The comparison examines convergences, differences, and complementarities, ensuring the source of the evidence remains identifiable while accounting for the specificities

of the participants, instruments, and questions addressed in the individual studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Specifically, the absence of a theme in one of the two contributions is not inherently considered a divergence, as it may stem from the different focus of investigation.

The interpretive framework of Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson's (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency enables agency to be interpreted as a phenomenon emerging from the interplay between teachers' personal and professional resources and the cultural, material, and relational conditions of the contexts in which they operate. The focus is placed on the conditions that can support or constrain a critical, intentional, and pedagogically grounded integration of AI, without assuming a linear transition from instrumental forms of use to more conscious approaches.

The iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions are employed as interdependent interpretive reference points. The first encompasses the experiences, knowledge, and professional repertoires that teachers mobilize when engaging with AI. The practical-evaluative dimension pertains to the professional judgment exercised in concrete situations, in relation to the opportunities and constraints of the school environment. The projective dimension involves the aspirations, purposes, and future orientations that provide direction for instructional choices.

These dimensions are considered neither sequential phases nor mutually exclusive categories. Consistent with the notion of the *chordal triad* proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), they can manifest simultaneously, taking on varying degrees of prominence across the analyzed situations. Agency, therefore, is not equated with the mere use of technology, but rather traced back to the ways in which the teacher orients and evaluates their actions in relation to educational purposes and contextual conditions.

The secondary analysis of the empirical data from the two studies was therefore conducted through an integrated and interpretive re-examination process, guided by the theoretical framework of Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015) and the notion of the *chordal triad* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Specifically, the data corpus was reorganized and examined in light of the three temporal dimensions of teachers agency, paying particular attention to references to pre-existing repertoires and routines of teaching practice (iterational dimension), to the choices and evaluations made regarding present resources, constraints, and challenges (practical-evaluative dimension), and to future orientations and the ongoing evolutions of professional identity (projective dimension). This synthesis and recomposition process led to the definition of the three core themes around which the findings are presented: although these themes cannot attest to a temporal evolution of agency or the effectiveness of the training intervention, they nevertheless highlight how the various dimensions of teacher agency interact and reshape themselves when engaging with AI technologies.

3. Analysis and Results

As outlined in the methodology section, the findings reported below are organized into three main core themes. The first investigates the relationship between professional repertoires and instructional design, highlighting the need for their strategic renewal within the iterational dimension. The second explores forms of support and pedagogical challenges in daily teaching practice, bringing to light the practical-evaluative dimension in constant tension with short- and long-term challenges. Finally, the third examines the implications of AI for an evolving teacher identity, reconstructed between iterational demands and projective outlooks. This structure makes it possible to navigate the three dimensions of the *chordal triad* while preserving their reciprocal and dynamic interplay.

1. Teacher Expertise in the Face of AI: Between Practical Support and Iterational Anchors

The analysis of this first theme primarily reveals elements of teacher experience that resonate with the iterational dimension of the ecological approach, in dialogue with the practical-evaluative dimension. AI is experienced as a valuable support in pursuing educational aims and objectives, requiring, however, a recursive and reflective return to one's professional background. Specifically, in certain situations, teachers note the technology's contribution in compensating for knowledge or methodological gaps, particularly when designing multidisciplinary pathways or addressing specific subjects for which they feel they lack the necessary resources. Furthermore, the use of AI appears to have an impact on an emotional and perceptual level: teachers report experiencing greater "peace of mind" and "confidence" in organizing their teaching, appreciating the opportunities for interaction and assistance they receive (Miatto et al., 2026a, p. 43). AI is recognized for its potential to act as a catalyst for creativity and productivity—not by replacing the teacher's contribution, but rather by stimulating active and innovative forms of instructional design that enhance the expression of teacher professionalism in the present moment of educational action.

Utilizing AI as an "assistant" (Miatto et al., 2026a, p. 44), teachers approach it to test their ideas, questioning them and seeking new perspectives; this stimulates novel ways of conceptualizing teaching and proposing classroom activities that harness its potential. Furthermore, the tool contributes to the detailed organization and planning of roles, schedules, materials, and activities (Mantoet et al., in press). Through this specific support, teachers experience a reduction in cognitive load during revision and instructional design, benefiting from the optimization of time and invested resources. With a forward-looking perspective, the teacher consequently envisions the possibility of reinvesting their time in different ways, which may include delving deeper into certain disciplinary aspects, creating innovative activities, or dedicating more relaxed and attentive time to their students (Miatto et al., 2026a).

However, teachers' observations also clearly highlight a perceived duty not to delegate the final version of their classroom materials to the tool. Strong emphasis is placed on a conscious, recursive, and intentional approach to the outputs generated in dialogue with AI, drawing on their own expertise and professionalism to evaluate

and modify the content. For the educational offering to meet the specific characteristics and needs of the students, the teacher's cognitive and reflective contribution therefore remains fundamental. This becomes an even more sensitive issue when AI is used to support the assessment process. Indeed, teachers report using it primarily to construct grading rubrics and generate structured, personalized feedback (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). Here too, teacher supervision proves to be of paramount importance: for assessment to become a useful element in the student's growth process, the teacher's mediation is indispensable. Only the teacher, knowing the student and keeping their holistic learning journey in mind, can provide effective support (Miatto et al., 2026a). Within this framework, it becomes evident that teachers recognize their own professional contribution as an 'iterational anchor' to be valued and critically adapted, enabling them to use AI with awareness, intentionality, and educational responsibility.

2. Rethinking Teaching in the Face of AI: Between Practical-Evaluative Challenges and Projective Horizons

In this second thematic category, the reflection shifts primarily to the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency, highlighting both the supportive outcomes and the educational and relational challenges brought about by the introduction of AI into school ecologies. In this scenario, new instructional and educational needs arise, demanding to be addressed with renewed creativity and reflexivity. A primary issue raising particular concern among teachers relates to the technology's impact on their students' growth and development. For this reason, teachers feel the need to incorporate into their specific role the responsibility of ensuring adequate supervision, in order to guide students in developing awareness and critical thinking (Miatto et al., 2026a). To achieve this, personal training in the use of this technology becomes fundamental to transmit methods, strategies, and meaningful perspectives, thus navigating the technological space while simultaneously developing a critical, reflective, and future-oriented approach. Among the most recurrent fears is that students' use of AI technologies may, over time, compromise their capacity for independent study, reflexivity, and deep, meaningful learning (Miatto et al., 2026a). Faced with this, teachers currently struggle to find strategies to mitigate the issue. Indeed, they note the need to explore creative and innovative paths, pushing themselves to rethink the very aims and objectives of teaching through new interpretive lenses (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). In day-to-day practice, this problem manifests itself in the completion of homework, which is often tackled using AI not to achieve understanding, but to avoid the effort of an intentional approach to study.

Recognizing that traditional homework assignments risk becoming ineffective, teachers feel called upon to find alternative approaches in the here and now that stimulate learning, moving beyond the cognitive and temporal 'shortcut' offered by AI (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). At the same time, however, teachers note that positive interactive experiences have by no means been lacking. On several occasions, the collaborative use of AI has fostered forms of creative expression and independent learning, helping to support problem-solving,

information retrieval, and critical reflection on the generated outputs. Furthermore, teachers have observed that AI has supported the inclusion of students with special educational needs or disabilities, facilitating everyone's involvement in classroom activities and promoting learning approaches tailored to the needs of those facing greater difficulties (Miatto et al., 2026a). The challenge of integrating AI in schools, therefore, actively drives teachers to seek approaches and strategies that can best support educational journeys. Alongside the training opportunities provided by the schools and the active experimentation undertaken during the first year of the *Go - Beyond traditional education* project—which enabled the practical and reflective construction of knowledge, networking with colleagues and supported by digital coordinators—teachers identify the need to forge a further alliance with families (Miatto et al., 2026a). This component is, in fact, considered essential for promoting a truly responsible integration of AI, underpinned by a shared pedagogical vision that is attentive to the development of every individual.

3. Between Readaptation and Future Projections: An Evolving Teacher Identity

In this final analytical category, agency fully manifests in its nature as a *chordal triad*, merging iterational anchoring with projective momentum. The resulting portrait is one of a teacher identity in motion that, in readapting its professional practice, envisions and designs new expressive modalities to address the present and future evolutions of school contexts. First, as noted in the previous sections, teachers observe that the use of AI brings with it unprecedented prospects and possibilities that, until recently, would have required a considerable investment of time and energy (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). The generated solutions are valued by teachers because they are innovative, effective, or well-suited to their specific needs (Mantoet et al., in press). However, even within the horizon of newly opened opportunities, there is no shortage of educational challenges and needs demanding to be addressed in the near future. Increasingly, teachers will need to draw upon their educational and pedagogical competencies, taking care to promote and enhance the holistic development of their students. The teaching profession, therefore, will be called upon to express itself optimally in these terms as well, creatively and reflexively drawing from past experience, and actively reinventing instructional and methodological strategies to effectively address the changes introduced by AI technologies (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). Their educational and cognitive background thus becomes the necessary foundation from which to experiment and innovate within rapidly changing school contexts.

This does not imply, however, an uncritical abandonment of instructional strategies and methodologies that do not involve the support or use of AI. The challenge, in this regard, lies in continuing to pursue a specific pedagogical tension, consistently directed toward the student and their holistic development. What matters, therefore, is knowing when and how to adopt AI; it must always serve the pursuit of specific instructional, formative, and educational objectives. The development of this kind of professional practice, as noted by the teachers, is enabled by the synergy between peer collaboration and professional training, aimed

at enhancing technical, ethical, and critical competencies alongside a renewed educational and pedagogical vision (Miatto et al., 2026a).

Confidence in their own abilities, relational support from colleagues, and the disposition not to be overwhelmed by change—but rather to embrace and agentically transform it—are foundational elements for fostering this same approach in students when faced with challenging situations. A crucial interpretive key is to maintain a constant dialogue with AI technologies, with oneself, and with the surrounding context. This enables teachers to become co-constructors of innovative, responsible, and mindful thinking that refuses to delegate the final evaluation of an activity, material, or idea to AI (Miatto et al., 2026a; Mantoet et al., in press). Adopting this approach means learning to actively steward and transform the school context in which they operate, where AI technologies will occupy an increasingly influential and pervasive space. Ultimately, the challenge is to adequately prepare to navigate this space starting now, ensuring that students are not left unequipped with the competencies required to engage with it critically and in a manner genuinely oriented toward their own growth.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this secondary study highlight the teacher's agentic tension in finding new educational postures and orientations in the face of the challenge of AI integration within the school environment. These rapid changes require teachers to dynamically and strategically adapt their professional practice, redefining pedagogical objectives and trajectories to account for the impact of AI technologies in school ecologies (Badino, D'asaro & Pedrazzoli, 2024). Alongside the adoption of reflective and intentional postures, which are necessary for designing instruction genuinely oriented toward students' needs (Miatto, Valentini & Mantoet, 2025, 2026b), the context plays a fundamental role: its relational, structural, and training resources, as well as its constraints, influence teachers in the expression of their professional practice, determining the possible trajectories of educational action (Panciroli et al., 2025). The introduction of AI, as emerged from the re-examination of the empirical evidence, does not leave teachers' professional practice unchanged, but rather calls upon them to consciously adapt methodologies and routines in response to a constantly evolving environment (Fawns, 2022). Stewarding this ongoing change today becomes a necessity that teachers can scarcely avoid.

Beyond its impact on their daily work routines, AI indeed raises crucial pedagogical issues concerning students. While experiences emerge where AI proves to be a valuable support in fostering independent, personalized, and simplified study (Lorenzoni, 2024), doubts and concerns also persist. Indeed, in certain situations, there is an observable tendency to use AI in ways that hinder, rather than promote, the cognitive effort required for deep learning (Fan et al., 2025; Lodge & Loble, 2026). Faced with this, the central question for teachers is how to readapt their educational offerings to continue promoting meaningful learning, while simultaneously developing ethical and critical competencies in the use of technology (Lodge et al., 2026). In this scenario, the role of the teacher appears irreplaceable; rather, new strategies are required to responsibly mediate the integration of AI into students' lives (Damiano, 2013). Considered within the framework of school

ecology, AI represents a new element impacting the teacher's work: while on the one hand it can provide support by optimizing time, personalizing materials, and reducing cognitive load during instructional design (Di Bello, 2023; Alexandrowicz, 2024), on the other it can generate burdens that lead to the rejection of its use, intentionally favoring different or 'traditional' instructional design methods (Selwyn, 2019). This choice, however, reveals a clear 'iterational anchor', whereby the teacher, when faced with difficulties, decides to pursue alternative design pathways to safeguard the meaning of their professional practice. As highlighted by recent European frameworks (Miao et al., 2024; Bekiaridis & Attwell, 2024), practical experience and comprehensive training prove essential for teachers to express their agency autonomously and consciously, whether they choose to utilize AI or opt not to. This approach to training provides not only technical support but also ethical and pedagogical grounding, which is fundamental for offering instruction attentive to the holistic development of the individual (Ranieri et al., 2024; Miatto et al., 2026b).

Interpreting agency from this perspective, contextual resources assume a crucial role. True support for teachers lies in the ability to situate their professional practice within a community equipped with adequate structures, training opportunities, spaces for peer collaboration, and a leadership capable of defining clear pedagogical guidelines (Ciasullo et al., 2026). In this regard, a limitation of the current study must be noted: it could only partially trace the impact of these structural and governance elements on AI integration. Although the role of the digital coordinator emerges as fundamental in coordinating technological innovation, future research must investigate the structural dimension of the school ecology to explore more deeply whether, and how, teachers experience the agentic load of integrating AI into their professional practice. Furthermore, the findings must be interpreted in light of the specificities of the sample: the teachers involved operate within Salesian schools, which are characterized by a distinctive educational and instructional charism. While this represents an invaluable cultural and value-based resource for the exercise of agency—one capable of defining a projective orientation aimed primarily at the holistic development and empowerment of young people—this specificity calls for caution when generalizing the data to different school contexts.

In outlining this landscape, the study ultimately seeks to offer an agentic interpretation of the ongoing changes. In an era permeated by AI, technical, ethical, and critical mastery of technology becomes indispensable. The ecological approach, in this regard, emerges as a promising theoretical and operational framework for supporting teacher agency, helping educators readapt their professional practice with intentionality, confidence, and renewed competence, within the context and with the support of their own school environments.

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