

The emotional component of teaching. A reflective training experience with teachers

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Abstract

The system of relationships and emotions that develop in the teaching-learning process define the complexity of teachers' education and pose the challenge of bringing out the emotional and affective culture that guides school life. Several studies on teaching practices highlight the tendency to refer to technical aspects as a key dimension of professionalism, rather than on relational and emotional dimensions that can promote the relationship with student. The creative and unprecedented reconfiguration of professional practice is configured as the outcome of a reflexive process of subjective construction and de-construction of the profession and its development.

The paper proposes a reflective training experience, which involved 76 teachers, focused on emotional and relational dimensions on teaching and based on the use of the narrative-autobiographical instruments (diary, narrative, metaphor). The results achieved in the monitoring phase show that the training offered an opportunity to reflect on oneself and one's personal and professional experience, starting from the use of alternative perspectives and interpretations than those that are already in use.

Keywords: reflective practices; emotions; teaching; narrative; educational relationship.

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1. Emotions and relationship in teaching

The teaching is configured as the work of building educational stories and gives professionals the ongoing challenge of learning to combine the effectiveness of doing with knowing how to stay in the relationship; this work qualifies through a reflective and exploratory style (Mortari, 2009) that promotes ways of thinking, feeling and acting the educational relationship mediated by research and change. However, forms of automation and resistance to change emerge (Cunti e Priore, 2014) which oppose the exercise of reflective

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competence (Schön, 1983) and, therefore, to processes of creative and unprecedented reconfiguration of professional practice.

Several studies on teaching practices highlight the tendency to refer to technical aspects as a key dimension of professionalism and to focus practices on operational methods already acquired and linked to a transmission model of knowledge, rather than on relational dimensions that can favor the relationship with students (Cunti, 2014; Geerink, Masschelein e Simons, 2010; Gonçalves, Azevedo e Alves, 2013).

The research, for a long time, has focused on the cold and rational component of teaching (Chen, 2016), such as knowledge, and has assigned less importance to the emotional and relational dimensions (Gomez, Allen e Clinton, 2004; Hargreaves, 1998), which instead seem to have a decisive influence on school life. Various studies have shown that emotions influence the definition of teachers' professional identity (Beauchamp e Thomas, 2009), their ability to manage uncertainty and change (Kelchtermans, Ballet e Piot, 2009), teaching methods and learning objectives (Frenzel, Götz e Pekrun, 2008; Sutton, 2004; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie e Minor, 2001) and student involvement (Roorda *et al.*, 2011).

The system of relationships and emotions that develop in the teaching-learning process define the complexity of teachers' education (Riva, 2015) and pose the challenge of bringing out the "affective culture" that guides school life (Lancini, 2015, p. 151). These arguments ground the importance of converging reflective training on three main objects - meanings, emotions and relationships (Bruzzone, 2018; Contini, 1992; Fabbri, Striano e Melacarne, 2008) – and, of activating on them a hypothetical thinking that is substantiated by processes of subjective construction and de-construction of the profession and its development.

The question of the identity and emotional-affective sphere puts teachers in front of the task of experimenting with different ways of thinking and feeling and, consequently, of being in relationship with the students. Learning to live educational relationships as a space of possibilities to try to be otherwise, both for oneself and for the system of relationships of which one is a part, constitutes a commitment of particular relevance on the training-pedagogical level.

Starting from the theoretical frame work outlined, the paper proposes a reflective training experience focused on emotional and relational dimensions on teaching; this training course was carried out in 2018 as part of an ERASMUS PLUS¹ project aimed at promoting emotional and relational competences at

¹ The ERASMUS + *Relational & Emotional Competences at School (R.E.C.)* project was coordinated by the Institute of Relational Psychotherapy in Naples and is part of the Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices KA201- Strategic Partnership for School Education actions.

school. The training process was monitored through the use of quantitative and qualitative instruments, questionnaires and diaries, which allowed us to evaluate the changes in the teachers' interpretations and, subsequently, practices.

2. Perspective, methodology and instruments of the teachers' training

The theoretical reflection was declined on an operational level in a research and training process, which aimed to provide the system with a consistent set of practices that could support the development of teachers' professional identities in critical reflection and the complexity of their experience. The outlined proposal is based on the methodological choice of focusing the process on research with and about teachers, on one hand, and, on the other hand, in-service training. These are both tools that aim to transform educational and didactic action through the acquisition of reflexive skills (Schön, 1983; 1987). The transformative value, in fact, lies in this ability to circulate and connect the elements and contents of the training with related research data, in order to build contextualised knowledge that is linked to practices and experiences. As a result, the work carried out is configured as a research and training process. The joint presence of these two levels means that the results of what has been observed from teachers have been used in the training activities carried out with them. In this sense, the collected research data can become a useful training tool and content for reflecting on professional practices.

Another methodological concept concerns the role played by group work in the training process; this is conceived as a privileged setting, one in which people can examine their experiences in a critical manner, through reciprocal sharing, conflict and interest – innate aspects of group dynamics – which fosters potentially meaningful learning processes (Mezirow, 2003). The group itself, when understood in these terms, can be defined as a training device, used for the development of transversal skills, through which we can implement a type of learning based on relationships and experiences. If the fundamental aim of the training is to offer a tool kit that can be used to train professionals in reflective practices, asking them to talk, write or reconsider the events experienced within classrooms is certainly not enough to encourage systematic reflection; instead, focus should be placed on the need to uncover and access their latent beliefs and build on them and with them a knowledge that brings together theory and practice, the way one thinks of the profession and how one authentically feels about it (Cunti, 2014).

The main objective of the training course was to lead the participants, 76 teachers working in kindergarten, primary schools and secondary schools in the

Campania region, to shed the monolithic professional standards and to adopt hermeneutic and reflexive practices. In this sense, the writer is aware that the change in professional behaviour comes from a different view of the role and the acquisition of the ability to look inside oneself, where the feeling of inadequacy and the fear of not being effective reside. To be consistent with this perspective, the training activity has followed four steps.

The first concerns framing the acquisition of emotional and relational skills and involves the use of the narrative-autobiographical method, through activities that allow people to share professional and personal experiences that recall the emotional, cognitive and active dimensions at the core of effective professional action. In this case, engaging individual externalisation, analysis and reflection processes around this theme aims to discover and refine an initial sensitivity in understanding the dynamics that, in teachers' minds, connect the themes and their experiences, and the stories and meanings that relate to the emotional-relational dimension of their professional experience. To this end, the teachers were asked to recount memories and narrate significant experiences from the past relating to their relationship with teachers, for the purposes of research and training. The group discussion, which started on the basis of reading and sharing the narrative materials, reveals that the teacher-student relationship requires a certain resonance, which can primarily be reached through an emotional symmetry that allows the teacher to become closer with the student through their own past experiences. As seen in the following narrative excerpts, by recalling their own experiences as students, teachers find an awareness of the negative emotions that characterised their own relationships with teachers. These are most often linked to a feeling of being misunderstood, undervalued, isolated and humiliated in class.

«I remember something that happened when I was in middle school [...] I never knew how to draw, and the art teacher asked us to depict the idea of red with images. It took me a lot of time and effort to do it [...] one of the images that I had of red was Christ on the cross and his blood. When the teacher called me up to her desk to examine my drawing, she saw the image and confronted me: "Doesn't that seem a little simple?" I don't think that I answered, but I remember how humiliated and hurt that question made me feel, a little child as I was. In that moment, I might have hated her».

«I was about 8 years old and one day my teacher decided that I had to learn how to use my right hand, even though I'm left-handed. I remember I cried a lot. To me, it was like going back in time. I remember feeling misunderstood, hatred for him and a sense of not being accepted by my classmates».

«I remember in primary school, I was once accused of being violent with one of my classmates. I had absolutely no idea what happened and was totally shocked when my

teacher, a nun, showed no doubt that I was guilty. It showed that she did not know me at all».

«I have particularly bad memories of my History and Philosophy teacher. Instead of alleviating and dispelling my fears, she always attacked me and frequently scolded me, even though I worked hard. For me, she was a model of what a teacher should not be».

Conversely, the positive emotions recounted by the participants concern engaging and affectionate relationships, prepared and motivating teachers and rewarding school experiences. The common thread that links the accounts of positive school relationships is feeling recognised, loved and understood.

«My teacher is someone that I always remember fondly and who I use as a model. She is a person who helped me grow immensely [...] I remember her amazing ability to get us involved, to make us feel like the key people in every lesson, which she always did with great kindness and affection».

«I will never forget my relationship with my secondary school Italian teacher. Her knowledge (which seemed encyclopaedic to me at the time) and her enormous sense of humanity made her, in my eyes, a perfect example of a teacher. I still think of her often today and I aspire to be what she represented to me for my students».

«My secondary school Italian teacher was demanding and strict but, at the same time, he was able to encourage and motivate me. I remember that he even invited me to his home, to help me prepare my topics for my exam presentation».

«In my fifth year at my scientific secondary school, my Italian teacher was open to every contribution and encouraged freedom of expression, critical analysis and personal contributions. She encouraged us to contextualise our arguments and hated mnemonic learning».

The narrative exercise described helped the teachers to develop an increased sense of closeness to their students, based on their recognition of similar experiences and events connected to their school lives. In fact, the ability to emotionally embrace others and create empathetic relationships is primarily achieved by feeling that we are similar and attributing something of our own to others. The training experience intended to promote, therefore, a shift from the personal level to the interpersonal and empathetic level (Bellingreri, 2013).

The second training step aims to reinforce the dimensions explored in the first session from a theoretical point of view and to subsequently encourage new forms of learning and operating. The step intended to encourage them to move from recounting their practices to question them in order to understand

their validity, thus calling into question their personal and professional knowledge (experience). Based on these assumptions, identifying concrete critical points relating to the management of emotional aspects within the class group is proposed as something that fosters reflection. This makes the fluid aspects that subconsciously direct the relationship between the professional and their professional actions less elusive and easier to control (simplifying the period and the concept). The activity described employs instruments that primarily deal with group comparisons and discussions and the simulation of school events that may reflect real instances of emotional management in classrooms. This requires the participants to play both the teacher and student roles, that is, circle time, role-playing.

The third step focuses on representations of the professional role and the implicit ideas of learning, teaching and education/training, etc., which affect knowledge, know-how and professional expertise. The goal is to acquire a greater understanding of the tacit perspectives that guide the personal ways in which people interpret the professional role. Focusing on representations and implicit beliefs in the processes of sense and meaning, which are, by nature, at the base of the professional experience, requires the use of reflexive tools and devices. These reveal what plays on our imagination and our perception of experiences through indirect narratives. We refer to alternative forms of artistic-expressive representation, such as metaphor (Black e Halliwell, 2000; Martínez, 2016; Saban, Koçbeker e Saban 2006; Sakui e Gaies, 2003), which, as shown in the most recent studies on teacher training, seem to have enormous potential to not only verbalise practices, but also to improve our understanding of how personal theories and views can impact teaching decisions. These tools are forms of imaginative narration – for example metaphors and drawings – promoting the association game that exists between what *is*, what *is not* and what *is similar* (Ricoeur, 1975). Thanks to the inherent figurative, imaginative, dynamic and creative dimensions of these tools, it is possible to create a free, subjective, dynamic and vibrant view of the professional world, which opens a path to alternative forms of knowledge (Franza, 1988; Laneve, 1981; 1994). The decision to propose non-linear forms of subjective representation as a means of revelation, signification and constructing new awareness can be linked to the opportunity they offer for creating new *insight* into the professions, roles and practices associated with them and connecting the cognitive dimension with the emotional dimension, through a conceptualisation process. To this end, the teachers were asked, during the course of their training, to express their professional role and their relationship with students through metaphor, narration or drawing. Some of the metaphors collected follow.

«The rain that nourishes the earth and its elements. Without rain, the plants do not grow; in fact, they wither and die. So too do children without the nourishment of knowledge and education – they do not become adults and citizens of the world».

«I think of the image of a river, with its water nourishing and enriching the earth, giving it, and all of its elements, the strength to survive. Children are nourished by our experiences, our feelings, our emotions and our words. Everything is directed at nourishing the person that we see in the child».

«An oak tree with lots of knots. I identify myself with a tree. I chose an oak tree because I think it is solid and balanced, but, most importantly, because of the shelter it offers».

«The thread of a kite. Being something that allows others to fly towards freedom and, when you are ready to go, you let it go».

«Climbing a mountain. I feel my relationship with the kids is like a mountain climber, who tirelessly carries the class, so we arrive at the summit».

The professional representations that emerged during the teachers' training constitute material that has activated a reflexive work based on constructing and deconstructing meanings; this aims to expand the professional awareness of oneself. In this specific case, the way in which teachers represent their role is linked to a system of beliefs – and, sometimes, stereotypes – that have a major impact on educational practices and which needs to be uncovered and reconsidered from a cognitive point of view, starting with the emotional dimension recalled by images/metaphors. The process of reflecting on the identified metaphors was carried out in 3 phases: re-establishing the type of metaphors that emerged and the meanings/motivations attributed to them, reflection on personal and professional experiences linked to the metaphors and, finally, creation of new interpretations and hypotheses for professional practices (Cunti, 2018).

Finally, the last step focuses on the construction and sharing of new professional practices. This considers the critical issues that emerged in previous sessions and attempts to interpret them based on the insights from the group work. It aims to define potential intervention methods for issues that recall problematic situations, such as bullying, widespread demotivation at school and poor school-family relationships. In this case, we used the Case Method (Barnes, Christensen e Hansen, 1994; Levin, 1995; Sato e Rogers, 2010). This is employed to support the training group in reflecting collectively on actual questions and entering into processes of negotiation regarding meanings and solution-based perspectives on the issues presented. The training activity aimed to encourage forms of learning placed and distributed among the

participants, also considering that teachers are often required to respond to school issues in a collaborative and collegial manner.

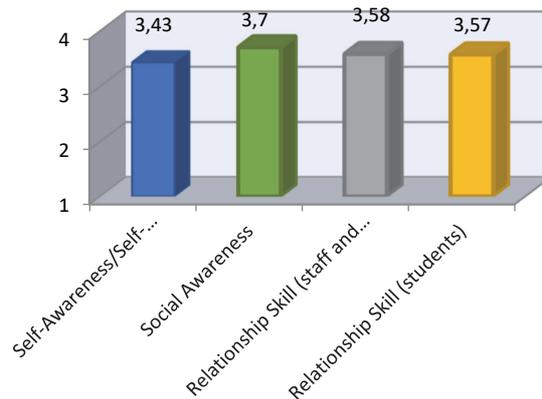
3. Monitoring of the training path

In order to evaluate the effects of training on teachers' perspectives and professional practices a questionnaire was used. This was taken from SECTRS (Social-Emotional Competence Teacher Rating Scale) (Tom, 2012) and was adapted and revised on an *ad hoc* basis, in accordance with the cultural differences and research needs. The questionnaire that was administered was called *Relational and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire* (RECQ)² and comprises 4 scales, each with 6 items. The first scale investigates *Self-Awareness and Self-Management* and refers to the ability to recognise and evaluate one's own emotions, interests and values and understand how they are used in the school context, as well as one's ability to manage emotions and behaviours, especially when tackling critical situations when there is a goal to be achieved; the second scale refers to the *Social Awareness* construct, which is defined as the ability to understand other people's perspectives and be empathetic and sensitive to others; the third and fourth scales are both focused on *Relationship Skills* and evaluate people's capacity to cooperate and form positive and meaningful relationships with other adults (school staff and families) and students. The questionnaire consists of 24 items, with people required to express the frequency with which the situations presented occur using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never*; 2 = *sometimes*; 3 = *often*; 4 = *always*). In order to investigate whether a change in perspective occurred for teachers during the training course, the questionnaire was administered twice: once at the beginning of the training course (T1) and once at the end (T2). The hypothesised change in terms of how the teachers represent themselves and position themselves towards emotional and relational aspects during the pre-training and post-training phase is linked to the goal of the training course outlined. This aimed to promote a new sense of awareness, reveal tacit knowledge and redefine professional actions through a reflexive itinerary.

The quantitative data obtained by administering the RECQ was subjected to frequency analysis and descriptive statistics. The T1 results show that teachers obtain high average scores on every scale in the questionnaire (Social awareness: M = 3.7; s.d. = 0.69; Interpersonal relationships with families and staff: M = 3.5; s.d. = 0.68; Interpersonal relationships with students: M = 3.5; s.d. = 0.60; Self-awareness/self-management: M = 3.4; s.d. = 0.77) (Graph 1).

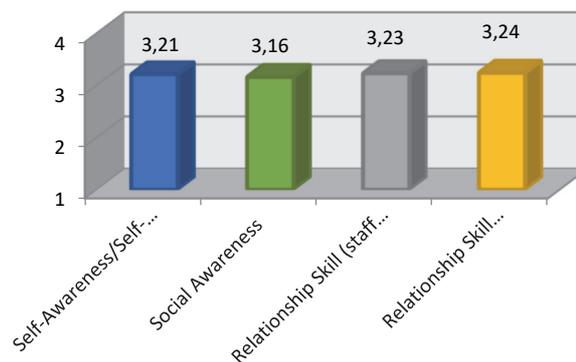
² Cronbach's alpha coefficient = 0,859.

The data collected in the pre-training phase highlight that teachers who participated in the research feel empathy towards their students and are sensitive to their individual differences, state that they have created positive relationships with colleagues, families and students, and, finally, are aware of their emotions and behaviour, as well as how to manage them.

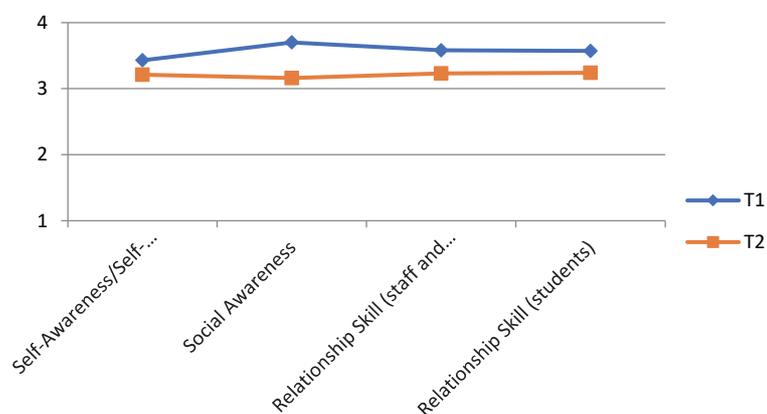


Graph 1 - Average scores during T1 (pre-training)

During the post-training phase (T2), the average scores obtained by the teachers in the various scales in the questionnaire are still high (Social awareness: $M = 3.16$; $s.d. = 0.70$; Interpersonal relationships with families and staff: $M = 3.23$; $s.d. = 0.67$; Interpersonal relationships with students: $M = 3.24$; $s.d. = 0.64$; Self-awareness/self-management: $M = 3.21$; $s.d. = 0.62$) (Graph 2), although there is a slight decrease compared to the average scores obtained during T1 (Graph 3).



Graph 2 - Average scores during T2 (post-training)



Graph 3 - Differences between the average scores during T1 and T2

The analyses conducted show that the difference between the average scores obtained in the pre-training phase, and those obtained in the post-training phase, are not statistically significant and that, as a result, there has been no significant change in the areas investigated.

The aim of the training course carried out is highlighted by some excerpts – which are included below – in the diary compiled by teachers during the training over a period of several months.

«We are learning to listen to others and to give ourselves time to think, act, talk and write».

«Questioning the way that we only identify with our own point of view as teachers but, above all, as adults».

«We have focused on the strengths and the critical sides of our being teachers».

«The emotions and reflexivity we need to manage the critical phases of our being ‘teachers’ but also ‘Individuals’».

«We create new perspectives compared to already consolidated experiences, often taken for granted».

«Overcome obstinacy to identify with our convictions and ideological barriers».

«We are cultivating the human aspect of educational work».

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the course on a quantitative level, a satisfaction questionnaire was administered during the final training session. It comprised 9 items that aimed to investigate the perceived quality in terms of expectations, content, methods and organisational aspects. Teachers were asked to respond to statements by choosing their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 2 = *a little*; 3 = *somewhat*; 4 = *very much*). As evidenced by the analysis undertaken, the level of satisfaction is high for all of the fields under investigation: contents-objectives congruence (M = 3,68; s.d. = 0.46), topics-expectations congruence (M = 3.71; s.d. = 0.45), topics-training interests congruence (M = 3.63; s.d. = 0.55), usefulness of the topics (M = 3.56; s.d. = 0.57), personal and professional self-development (M = 3.61; s.d. = 0.58); usefulness of training in teachers' education (M = 3.62; s.d. = 0.58), training time-topics congruence (M = 3.30; s.d. = 0.54), satisfaction about training organization (M = 3.62; s.d. = 0.48), satisfaction about topics (M = 3.77; s.d. = 0.42)(Graf. 4).



Graph 4 - Level of satisfaction with training

4. Conclusion

The data collected through the questionnaire, although they do not show a significant change in emotional and relational competences, are relevant from an formative point of view, as it highlights teachers' tendency to perceive themselves in a more critical and conscious manner, in light of the course they carried out; this means that, during the training course, particularly the pre-training phase, there was a failure to feel satisfied, which must be replaced by

a more complex interpretation of their emotional and relational skills. In other words, the training course offered an opportunity to reflect on oneself and one's personal experience, starting from the use of alternative perspectives and interpretations than those that are already in use. This shows that the training course carried out has provided tools for a more aware interpretation of oneself and one's surroundings. The latter is a crucial aspect for acquiring and improving specific skills. There are two aspects worth highlighting. The first concerns the effectiveness characteristics of the course, which has been useful for inspiring reflective processes around our teachers' interpretations and professional practices, as demonstrated by the teachers' diaries; the second pertains to the need to focus more on the exploration of teachers' ideas and behaviours concerning emotional and relational aspects, with particular reference to real didactic situations.

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