

EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALISM IN THE ITALIAN DOUBLE-TRACK LEARNING AND TRAINING ACADEMIC SYSTEM

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Abstract

The educational professionalism has to deal with the complexity of contemporary society, which requires a multidimensional approach to individual and collective needs. The dichotomy between social and health education, implied by the current double-track learning and training academic system, shows its limits in the introduction of a disparity in social acknowledgment - mainly due to a lack in legislation, that qualifies as “enabling degree” only the one related to health professions - which is likely to reduce the guarantees of citizenship rights, besides going on weakening the educational professionalism itself.

An *integrated model of lifelong learning* comes out as a strategy in seeking a convergence between the two profiles, placing them in an organic project aimed to create generative connections between theoretical and experiential knowledge, transversal and specific, pedagogical and organizational skills, through which strengthen the value of educational social work.

Key words: educational professionalism, lifelong learning, acknowledgement, qualification.

A profession is defined in terms of recognized knowledge, skills, activities and areas of intervention, established by the legislative and the educational systems. The characteristics of the professional profile of the educator emerge, therefore, from the indications contained in national and regional policies, which the local authorities, the public organizations and the private social sector have to refer to.

The distance between the general principles of law and the concrete need to manage local problems, made of multidimensional and specific needs for different territories, however, produces at national level a lack of uniformity in the ways of gearing the educational work possibilities. The heterogeneity is reinforced by two main critical issues: a double-track learning

and training academic system and a parallel impasse in legislation that produces a disparity of recognition between the two professional profiles.

Critical aspects in course of analysis and in search of solutions at a political level

Looking at the history of social educators' profession, since the fifties has emerged the awareness of the need for a solid educational preparation, supported by methodological tools and reflective abilities, that can provide transversal and specific knowledge and skills in relation to different areas of intervention. Professional Schools for Educators were created in the sixties by provincial or municipal governments; they defined a theoretical and practical training model based on a multi-disciplinary knowledge and closely tied to local services.

The most recent transition to the academic education took place at national, regional and local level with a fragmented regulation, that consequently has produced an unclear recognition of the professional profile of social workers and their related competencies admitted to the exercise of the educational profession.

The situation is complicated firstly by the existence - permitted by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) - of a double-track learning and training academic system: for the acquisition of knowledge and skills in education it is possible to choose between two parallel profiles, corresponding to two different degree classes:

- L-19, class in Educational Sciences, oriented to a pedagogical and humanistic profile;
- SNT/2, class in Health Professions and Rehabilitation, oriented to a technical medical profile.

The educational proposals are different in subject contents, according to their distinct focuses of interest: Educational Sciences courses are oriented towards a multidisciplinary approach to social problems, pursued by stimulating the connection between pedagogical, anthropological, sociological and psychological knowledge; in curricula related to the Departments of Medicine, however, the scientific and medical disciplines are in the foreground, with pedagogical knowledge in the background.

In both academic paths it can be recognized the intention to promote the recursion between theories and practice, starting from the opportunity of trial the professional role within the services. The quantitative gap in the number of hours reserved for training activities, however, reveals two different functional attributions to theoretical and practical knowledge:

academic studies can be planned to introduce to the educational profession by moving towards its theoretical and reflective foundations or, assuming a more pragmatic approach, through the acquisition of specific operational-methodological competences.

The main characteristics of the professional profiles and the recipients of their educational actions are similar, but the distance between the two paradigms - social and health ones – gives to educational work different shapes, as it mainly seems to regard transformative projects rather than diagnostic or rehabilitative actions of assistance.

Multidimensional social needs make evidence of the coexistence of social and health dimensions in stories of life of disadvantaged people; the introduction of a dichotomy between them is likely to reduce the complexity of problems and the range of possibilities of intervention, ending with the weakening of educational professionalism itself. An impasse in legislation, that in the last nineties has qualified only health professions, has justified a different attribution of value to social or health qualifications; the disparity of recognition and legitimacy has led and allowed the formalization of an imbalance of power and the consequent inequalities in employment opportunities; but the international orientation is designed to closely link the health professions with the human sciences and, therefore, to support the search for substantive responses to the growing complexity of contemporary life, rather than their simplification and fragmentation.

It is currently ongoing the legislative process of evaluation of the Draft Law On. Iori n. 2656/2014 "Regulation of professions of educator and pedagogue": in coherence with European guidelines, which encourage the sharing of common competency models, it aims to put an end to the professional and academic mess on professional functions and social recognition of educators and pedagogues, by defining tasks, functions, places and areas of intervention, taking into account the needs and requests (not only of assistance) emerging from the territories.

New ways of thinking about educational professionalism, not only in terms of working possibilities, but also of learning and training opportunities, recommend the adoption of a systemic approach: it is useful to bring a particular problem in an overall framework, in order to revise the contradictions and to seek coherent and sustainable new strategies, aimed to increase the social, cultural and economical recognition of educational professionalism, but above all to preserve and develop the quality of educational work.

Educational professionalism is based on a continuous process of learning

The educational professionalism, by virtue of the complexity and constant evolution of its contents, has a lifelong learning need: it is the result of a process of continuous acquiring of theoretical knowledge, methodological tools and experiential skills that certainly cannot be accomplished in three years of academic studies. The mastery of pedagogical and educational skills comes out from a continuous process of in-depth study and integration of partial knowledge; it can be accomplished by a trial of the educational role and the acquisition of meta-reflective tools, leading to the development of theories from praxis. Not considered only as an individual process, the dialogue and a fair exchange among colleagues are recommended, in adoption of a capitalization logic, to draw up a gradually shared and transmitted professional knowledge. A serious evaluation of the critical aspects of having two parallel institutional curricula - different more in terms of legitimacy than in quality of knowledge and skills offered - enables to recognize the risk of creating an imbalance within the educational professionalism.

This awareness stimulates the research for points of contact, integration and convergence between social and health approaches. Both academic programs are designed to convey theoretical and practical knowledge that can support a functional analysis of social, cultural and territorial realities, as well as to develop pedagogical and design skills, methodological and operational abilities, organizational and institutional competences, in order to enable students to carry out complex programming and planning tasks (such as the needs analysis, the structuring of educational interventions, their organization and ongoing monitoring, the evaluation of the results achieved). Furthermore, as professionals, they should be able to assume different functions in relation with disadvantaged people requiring support, accompaniment, facilitation, assistance, treatment and rehabilitation (often in collaboration with other professionals). They also should take on the role of coordinator and/or manager of projects, activities and services through the integration and enhancement of local resources.

These are complex professional tasks for which a basic training is a prerequisite; however it is clearly indispensable to think about a lifelong learning programme. In fact, the complexity of social work and educational intervention requires the development of analytical and interpretative skills in order to figure out social dynamics in different contexts, and a multidimensional approach to problems and social needs, according to specific characteristics of

people and territories. The educators' professional skills must be transversal and specific, on social, educational and health issues, acquired at university (which provides a theoretical framework) and in the field (where actively making experience of the professional role and reflectively proceeding with the construction of a solid professional identity). Undoubtedly, the educational professionalism is built through a recursive process of connection between theories and practice. Except for training activities, the academic system is not currently managing this process at the maximum level: in the articulation of bachelors and master degrees, in fact, a program oriented to an in-depth knowledge of specific aspects of educational work or specialized skills and methodologies of intervention does not exist; there is rather a shift to other apical professional figures, with roles and functions different from educators.

The quality of educational social work therefore needs to be ensured and searched through a process of communication between social policies and services, universities and organizations, students and educators; thus, between all those subjects that are participating (formally or informally) in the process of construction of educators' professional identity. They observe educational events from different points of view and produce local theories that often remain on parallel tracks, while they should be brought together into an organic project of large shared knowledge, in the assumption of the task and the responsibility to strengthen the social and cultural recognition of educational professionalism.

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