

THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTS' NEEDS, A WAY TO OPTIMIZE A SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM: A STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VERONA

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study that involves 813 in-service teachers working in school connected to the University of Verona, during the academic year 2018/2019. The aim is to reveal which challenges are facing schools, in order to use these results to optimize the Service-Learning Program for the pre-service teacher degree.

In order to make future teachers able to face the complexities of the contemporary education landscape, it is essential that teacher education programs establish meaningful relationships both with real contexts (in-service teachers, school communities, etc.) and with the results of the academic research, that should be in relation with practitioners' needs (Lagemann, 1999; Pring, 2000; Levine, 2006; Epstein, 2013).

The empirical inquiry is set in an ecological framework according to the idea that it is important to study the world of meanings in which a person moves (Merriam, 2002; Mortari, 2007), in order to understand a phenomenon that happens in real life. We used a phenomenological method because it is particularly suitable to explore people's lived experience (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The tool of collecting data is a semi-structured interview, aimed to investigate what are - starting from teachers' experiences - the most important problems emerging from schools. The analysis is carried out with content analysis method because it allows to define and organize the meaning of a text to discover the core elements without losing its undertones (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

We coded the data about the needs of schools into some macro categories; each of them collects a set of basic categories. The paper will present all the basic and the macro categories since all these categories make evident the set of teachers' needs.

Keywords: educational needs; future teachers; civic engagement.

Thematic Line (and, where applicable, area): Thematic Line 2 (Research on SDG in Service-Learning in Higher Education/Research on Service-Learning supported by the SDGs), Area A.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 4, 17, 3.

Introduction

One of the experiential learning strategies that can be particularly helpful in pre-service teacher education is Service Learning (Anderson & Pickeral, 2000; Lee, Park & Chun, 2018; MacPhail & Sohun, 2019).

Within the Master's Degree in Primary School Education of the University of Verona, the last two years of teacher training has assumed the form of a Service Learning program (managed by the Laboratory "Le CoSe" under the direction of Luigina Mortari). The program is defined as a Community Research Service Learning (CRSL) Program because students achieve academic outcomes (learning) through a service action (service) aimed at responding to the needs of a community (community), according to the idea of a university that serves its community with research and educational practices (Mortari, 2017; Silva, 2018; Mortari, Silva, & Ubbiali, 2019).

The program is organized into five steps: in the first step (1) the students attend a specific course in which they learn how to design an intervention starting from the needs of a specific context, how to use qualitative observation tools and how to create a qualitative report of the experience. In the second step (2) the pre-service teachers are connected with the in-service teachers. During the third step (3) students try to identify the community's need through analysis. The fourth step (4) is focused on designing an action aimed at responding to the identified need. In the last step (5), the pre-service teachers develop educational research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the action they have conducted.

Sustainable Development Goals

Our research is linked to the SDGs as we try to ensure a good education for our students (future teachers) to enable them to face all the challenges they will meet in their professional future (goal 4) and we aim to promote professional growth establishing meaningful relationships between the academic research and the real contexts (in-service teachers, school communities, etc.) (goal 17).

We would like to help teachers find solutions to perceived problems to continuously improve the quality of a school's services, by creating an environment in which the well-being of teachers, families and children can flourish (goal 3).

Development of the content

The aim of the empirical inquiry here presented is to understand the real needs of schools, in order to calibrate the pre-service teacher training in the light of the challenges the world of education is facing today.

1. Methodology

We followed a naturalistic inquiry approach according to which it is necessary to observe the world as an object of meaning: this means that to understand experience we have to focus the attention not only on what "happens" in real contexts but also on the meaning that people ascribe to what they are living through (Mortari, 2007; Merriam, 2002). This research adheres to a phenomenological method, because it is particularly suitable to explore people's lived experience (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

The data collection tool is that of a semi-structured interview, with two questions:

- What are the problems / needs that you must deal with during your teaching activities?
- How could we help you to face these problems/needs?

Analysis is conducted using a content analysis method, which allows us to define and organize accurately the description and the meanings embedded in the content of text and discover the core elements without losing their undertones (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

The last phase of the analysis has led us to the building of a coding system organized in conceptual labels and categories (Fig. 1).

We sent requests for participation to around 1,100 teachers during the academic year 2018/2019.

CODING SYSTEM	
Characteristics of the context	Diversified and large classes
	Difficulties in building the class group (class building)
	Low levels of wellness in the class
	Lack of resources (unsuitable settings, lack of instruments and school materials)
	Intrusiveness of bureaucracy
	Difficulties in programming and scheduling times
	Lack of adequate personnel (few human resources)
	Lack of teachers' co-presence and empowerment figures
	Lack of support teachers
	Difficulties related to INVALSI (National Institute for the Schools' System Evaluation) test
Difficulties related to an excessive number of special projects	
Teaching aspects	Difficulties in carrying out group teaching activities
	Need for assessment tools
	Difficulties in attention and concentration
	Limited motivation and commitment among the children
	Need for tools for the development of student-centred learning educational experiences
	Need for tools for the development of teaching courses focused on specific problems (to enhance fine motor skills, problems of memorizing)
	Difficulties in managing classes with wide differences in learning performances
	Difficulties related to the respect of teaching times
	Difficulties in managing the class group
	Difficulties related to non-transmissive teaching proposals
Lack of laboratories for teaching activities	
Difficulties in managing gifted children	
Relationship with the children and transversal elements	Problematic relationships among the children
	Relationship problems between adults and children
	Lack of care for setting and school materials
	Difficulties related to the respect of shared rules
	Deficiencies in emotional literacy
	Children's inability to live the expectation
	Difficulties in managing the common fatigue of the children
	Difficulties in the management and containment (even physical) of the children
	Disrespect and lack of listening to the other
	Lack of a sense of sharing
	Lack of thoughtful skills
	Children's need for reassurance and attention
	Lack of autonomy, creativity and exploratory approach
	Growing egocentrism on behalf of the children
	Children's fragility in managing daily difficulties
	Lack of positive self-confidence of the children
Need to be heard on behalf of the children	
Difficulties in communicating with the children	
Difficulties in managing early-children	
Relationship between school and parents	Lack of a school-family alliance
	Difficulties in the relationships with families in difficulty
	Difficulties in the relationships with foreign families
	Poor cooperation among families
Relationship among the teachers and between teachers and other professional roles	Need for more effective cooperation among the teachers
	Need for more effective cooperation between the teachers and the experts
	Need for specialised experts
Teachers' learning needs	Lack of the theoretical/practical circle
	Need for pedagogical/teaching updating
	Lack of training on Special Needs Children's tools and disability
	Need for tools to beat burnout
	Lack of training on teaching innovation
Need to document good practices	

Figure 1

2. Results

We collected 813 answers from the teachers, and we extracted 1357 occurrences.

In this paper -for space reasons- we focus our attention on the macrocategory "Teachers' learning needs".

2.1 Teachers' learning needs

The analysis of the data shows the needs of teachers to be that of more pedagogical and practice-based teacher training, for example the need for more training on tools to identify and manage

disability, but also more training on teaching innovation.

New technologies have changed the way we relate to each other and the way we approach the world, which bring out common issues we need to handle such as feeling responsible for the future of the younger generation who are increasingly using these devices.

However, those who are familiar with digital technologies will not automatically transfer their skills into their teaching practice: for this reason, it is important to prepare the pre-service teachers to use technology in the classroom and acknowledge the value of integrating educational technology into their classroom practices (Kumar & Vigil, 2011).

Another significant element is the risk of burn-out perceived by teachers, as a result of a sense of abandonment due to the lack of recognition of their role, the lack of resources, the management of a heterogeneous class group. There appears to be a significant relationship between the causes of teacher stress and the causes of teacher job dissatisfaction (Woods & Weasmer, 2004).

“Strategies for teachers to manage and control their emotionality, stress, due to the increasingly widespread risk of burn out that work with children, especially this age group, involves” (Interview #548) Burnout is predicted by teachers’ perceptions of job demands like overload and students’ behaviors. It is predicted also by the absence of job resources, like supervisory support and innovative climate (Hakanen et al., 2006).

A protective element to introduce might be the possibility of developing a support network made up of colleagues and experts which can provide support in times of difficulty experienced at school and promote a culture of listening to the experience of others. Moreover some authors (Van Maele, D., & Van Houtte, M. 2015) explored the relationships of trust in school and they showed some protective factors for teachers’ emotional exhaustion, such as the specific importance of teacher-principal trust.

Conclusions

The research shows that the teachers evidence important problems with a lack of training and with the risk of burnout: this makes us aware that the training of future teachers must be directed towards specialized courses on technological devices and training especially in the field of disability. Nowadays we are living in a pandemic that has changed the manner in which we are experiencing the school: teachers are facing distance-learning, thus it is important that they acquire skills regarding digital technologies to ensure their training is adequate. In respect of the issue of burnout it is important we make future teachers aware of the emotional stress associated with this kind of job so they are able to recognize in themselves the first signs of burnout. These considerations highlight that being aware of in-service teachers’ problems is the first step to try to both solve some of these problems in the short term, as well as ensure better preparation for teachers to come.

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