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DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES IN TEACHERS: THE ROLE OF TUTOR AND MENTOR

Sofia Cramerotti

*Educational Psychologist and Pedagogist, Department of Human Science, University of Verona,
Verona, Italy
[sofia.cramerotti@univr.it](mailto:sوفia.cramerotti@univr.it)*

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify the role played by tutors and mentors in accompanying novice teachers within a specialization course aimed at supporting teachers for the classroom inclusion of students with disabilities. The specific aim of this qualitative research was to investigate the expert teachers' features and how they (in the role of tutors and mentors) perceive the distinct role they play in the development of novice teachers' professional competencies through peer review. In particular, the focus was on two different but interconnected activities: a) a direct internship supervised by a tutor; and b) an indirect internship supported by a mentor. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten expert teachers and were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Results show a wide proposal of features that characterize a good tutor and mentor in accompanying novice teachers' growth. Secondly, the collected data provided an important contribution in that they helped identify the most important

and useful activities (referring to the direct and indirect internships) for the development of competencies in future support teachers.

Keywords

Professional competencies, Support teacher, Mentor, Tutor, Internship

1. Introduction

The aim of this qualitative research was to investigate the expert teachers' perception in the role of tutors and mentors of the distinct role they play in the development of novice teachers' professional competencies through peer review.

Teachers' training and the development of teaching professional skills and competencies are crucial aspects for improving the quality and equity of the entire teaching system (Danielson, 2007).

Peer review of teaching is a formative method typically oriented exclusively to improve one's teaching processes and professional growth. It is based on the use of formative feedback, peer tutoring, coaching, mentoring and co-reflection (Bernstein, 2008). Professional development through collaborative peer-supported review, focuses on parity, reciprocity, and dialogue between the peers (a novice teacher and an in-service expert teacher) (Gosling, 2009).

The development of the teacher's professional competencies as a "reflective practitioner" and the strategic role of peer-to-peer observation are central research topics in teacher education (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; 2005). The teacher, as a member of a "professional community of peers", is a key figure in promoting the quality and the effectiveness of school contexts and, more generally, of teaching-learning processes (Chism, 2007).

A triangulation of "looks" of novice teacher, expert teacher (tutor-mentor) and researcher, from different but integrated perspectives, can provide useful elements for the model's definition.

The research methodology refers to the practitioners' professional knowledge as specific knowledge not coming directly from theoretical knowledge but emerging instead through narratives as a generative place of relevant knowledge about practice (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005).

The specific aim of this qualitative research was to investigate the expert teachers' perception (in the role of tutors and mentors) of the distinct role they play in the development of novice teachers' professional competencies through peer review. The field of investigation was a

teachers' training course to become specialized support teachers for the classroom inclusion of students with disabilities (Cramerotti & Ianes, 2019).

In particular, the focus was on two different but interconnected activities: a) a direct internship supervised by a tutor; and b) an indirect internship supported by a mentor.

Tutoring is configured as an educational relationship, which is established between a teacher in training and a more experienced teacher belonging to the same professional profile. Tutorship scenarios are characterized by intentional training and formal learning.

Through the process of empowerment, the tutor puts the tutee in a position to gain experience and learn from mistakes while maintaining the role of support and accompaniment (Davis & Higdon, 2008).

Mentoring is an intense relationship between an experienced teacher and a novice teacher that fulfills two main functions: to provide a competent model and an opportunity for career development, and to offer the necessary support for managing critical moments during the training.

It is a relationship based exclusively on trust and it is marked by psychological equality, intrinsic motivation on the side of both the mentor and the mentee, reciprocal communication, and mutual listening (Hobson et al., 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

The elective relationship between mentor and mentee is characterized by greater emotional complicity and it takes place as a conscious reciprocal choice (Hutchings, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2013).

2. Research Framework: The Support Teacher Training

The framework of this research is supported by teacher training, in particular, a "Specialization Course for didactic support activities for pupils with disabilities". It is a university training course and it aims to contribute to the construction of a specialized teacher profile for educational and didactic activities for pupils with disabilities.

Since 1977, Italian schools have promoted a full-inclusion model and it has welcomed all pupils with disabilities into general classes. According to Law 104/92, a full-inclusion model within mainstream schools, aims to develop the learning, communication, and social skills of students with disabilities and to ensure their access to individualized learning and the necessary resources to achieve all the goals established for that pupil. One of these fundamental resources is the support teachers assigned to classes that have pupils with disabilities. They are important

figures who accompany the students in their school journey from kindergarten to secondary school. They are teachers with specific skills in the field of disability and inclusive education (Cramerotti & Ianes, 2019)

In recent years, the Italian Ministry of Education, in cooperation with some Italian universities, has promoted innovative support teacher training to prepare a select group of teachers with specific competencies in the field of disability. In this way, they want to facilitate and guarantee full inclusion in the school system of all students with special educational needs.

The ‘Specialization Course for didactic support activities for pupils with disabilities’ (Ministerial Decree 30 September 2011) is a university training course provided by the Italian teacher training system. The course aims to contribute incisively to the construction of a specialized teacher profile for educational and didactic activities for pupils with disabilities.

The main purposes of this one-year course are:

- To Develop Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies for Building Teachers’ Professionalism, With A Particular Focus on Inclusive Education;
- To Train Professional Teachers with High and Specific Operational Skills;
- To Promote the Ability to Draw in A Targeted and Productive Way (Theoretical Psycho-Pedagogical and Scientific-Cultural Reflection); And
- To Introduce the Implementation of Research-Action Processes.

Alongside traditional lectures and workshops, this support teacher training includes two different but interconnected internships divided into:

- A Direct Internship, Which Refers to the Experience of the Trainee within the School. This Type of Internship Is Supported and Supervised by A School Trainee’s Tutor (An In-Service Support Teacher); And
- An Indirect Internship, With a Specific Focus on Self/Co-Reflection of the Entire Experience. It Includes A Re-Elaboration of The Activities of The School Where the Internship Was Conducted, Which Is Supported And Accompanied By A University Mentor (An Expert Support Teacher Member Of The Specialization Course Board).

The two main research questions are:

- What are the main features that characterize a good tutor and mentor in accompanying novice teachers’ growth?

- What are the most important and useful activities (referring to the direct and indirect internships) that contribute to the development of competencies in future support teachers?

3. Method

The research method was based on a Grounded Theory Approach, congruent with the described theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This method allows us to design a middle-range theoretical model.

3.1. Research Design and Procedures

Despite the descriptive slant, qualitative research must always point to the formalization of a model that can offer indications for guiding teachers' training and increasing the quality of educative and didactic practices in the school context.

For this reason, the use of a grounded approach, based on a constant recursive return on data, was considered congruent with the described theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This method allows us to design a middle-range theoretical model.

While remaining anchored to the data collected, it manages to explain the complexity of the dimensions investigated in this specific context. At the same time, it also offers useful ideas and suggestions for a more general explanation of the real essence of the phenomenon.

The theoretical model that emerges from the research can therefore be used (in a practical way) and further tested in other similar contexts.

3.2. Participants

The participants were a group of ten expert teachers (five female and five male) with a wide experience in both the roles of tutor and mentor.

Within the training course for specialized support of students with disabilities, they accompanied middle school novice teachers in direct and indirect internships.

3.3. Data Gathering

To enhance aspects of teaching peer to peer, the research has to be carefully designed. The appropriateness of the choice of which approach is more useful for the research aims must be addressed when researching teacher education. In this case, the choice was for gathering qualitative data.

In this research, the data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The approach adopted was a sort of canvas that facilitated focusing on the conversation about the practice to

explore in more detail the practices and collect peer-to-peer practice experiences. This option provided me with the opportunity to investigate the phenomenon in-depth.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and revised.

3.4 Data Analysis

The method followed in this research is the one indicated by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The focus is oriented on working directly on the documents/collection of texts to generate labels and, subsequently, categories. A schematical report of the process is provided.

3.4.1. Preparation of the Single Analysis Document

The first step was the preparation of the document that contained all the transcripts of the interviews. The texts of the interviews were organized in a table that reported the progressive number of the speaking turn, the alphanumeric code for identifying the interviewer and the interviewee, and the text.

3.4.2. Reading and ‘Cleaning’ The Text

Qualitative analysis is a continuous hand-to-hand with the texts and requires the patience of countless readings. The first step is a ‘non-oriented’ reading of the material, which provides a first idea about texts. In some cases, the parts judged not useful to understand the answers’ content were deleted.

3.4.3. First Level of Analysis: Labelling (focused coding)

It was indeed essential to start with a bottom-up directionally (in a grounded logic and ‘direction’), from small (the single meaning unit of sense) to large (the grouping of related labels). The title attributed to each label expressed, shortly, the meaning of the unit. During this phase, I often opted for labeling the words used by the speakers to avoid interpreting the texts and to stay ‘as close as possible to the meaning of the interviewees.

3.4.4. Second Level of Analysis (Axial Coding)

The second level of the analysis was centered on categorization, that is, on the identification of a ‘title’ to be attributed to each grouping of labels. The labels were grouped by the affinity of meaning, to generate groupings (clusters) of labels with a relative excerpt and, in the end, the category.

3.4.5. Third Level of Analysis (Theoretical Coding)

To bring out the relationships between the identified categories, it was often necessary during this phase to go back to the previous steps and refine the formulations of categories or aggregations of labels. This helped identify the core categories.

3.4.6. Development of an Explanatory Model

The final step was dedicated to the development of an explanatory model. This model took into account all the previous steps and emerged from the reorganization and highlighting of the main relationships between the core categories.

4. Results

The results contribute to identifying the main features that characterize a good tutor and mentor in accompanying novice teachers' and the most important and useful activities that contribute to the development of competencies in future support teachers.

The first research question aimed to identify the main features that characterize a good tutor and mentor in accompanying novice teachers' growth. Table 1 shows what emerged from the data.

Table 4.1 Characteristics of a Good Tutor and Mentor (Emerging Categories)

- Guide
- Empathetic Approach
- Agent of Change
- Competent Model
- Support and Scaffolding
- Builder of Positive Environments
- Stimulating and Increasing Comparison, Dialogue, Discussion, and Reflection
- Fostering Cooperation and Collaboration
- Mentoring 'Beyond' The Classroom
- Provide Formative, Situated, Effective, and Meaningful Feedback (Ongoing)
- Non-Judgmental
- Being Available to Listen and Authentically Present
- Available for Conversation (Formal and Informal)

- Expert in School Dynamics
- Modelling Mutual Respect
- Constructor of Relationships
- Establish A Climate of Trust
- Embodies Ethical Values
- Approachable and Available
- Sharing Ideas, Resources, and Decisions
- Sharing Experiences and Best Practices
- Problem Solver
- Accomplishment
- Seeing the Challenges in A Positive Way
- Focus on Potential Opportunities
- Showing Effective and Innovative Ways of Teaching
- Knowing Tips for Class Management
- Celebrating Success Together
- Provide Classroom Observation and Post-Observation Debriefing
- Promoting a Sense of Professional Agency and Empowerment
- Stimulating Recognition of Progress
- Developing A Positive Attitude Towards Reflection and Recognition Of Their Ability To Change Their Practice
- Providing Emotional Support

The second research question aimed to identify the most important and useful activities (referring to the direct and indirect internships) that contribute to the development of competencies in future support teachers. For this part of the internship, the novice teacher is invited to take notes on the activities carried out during the internship in a ‘diary portfolio’, in which they briefly report on the different types of activities and write down any observations, memos, notes on their emotional state and other reflections.

Three fundamental phases emerged from the data on the direct internship: a) preparation; b) observation; and c) active participation, each of which is characterized by specific activities and topics (as they emerge from the categories) (see Table 2).

Table 4.2 Direct internship

Phases	Activities and topics
<i>Preparation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflections on General Issues Related to the Internship;• Purposes, Objectives, Articulation, Methodological Setting, Tools, Methods of Interaction with The Tutor, Etc.;• Reflections on General Issues Relating to The Function of The Support Teacher Within the School Context;• School Organization with A Particular Focus on Pupils with Special Educational Needs;• Aims and Fundamental Elements of Inclusive Teaching;• Reflections on Inclusive Italian Law;• Functions of The School Working Group for Inclusion;• Relations with Families, Local Authority, Social Sector, Healthcare Figures, The System and The Organization of Specialist Assistance, Etc.;• Building A Collaborative Approach with All the School's Stakeholders (School Principals, Curricular Teachers, Other Support Teachers, Educators, Auxiliary Staff, Etc.);• Building A Positive and Empathic Relationship with The Pupil with A Disability and The Classmate Group;• Sharing (With Tutor and Mentor) The Training Project; And• Examination of All the Documentation Concerning the Pupil: Medical Certifications, Programs, Products, Evaluations, And the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (In Full Respect Of Privacy).

<i>Observation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guided Observation of The Activities Carried Out in The Section/Class, Aimed to Identify And Analyze Educational And Teaching Strategies, As Well As The Different Styles And Methods Adopted By The Support Teacher That May Allow The Trainee To Later Develop Their Own;• Peer-To-Peer Observation Between the Tutor (An Expert Support Teacher) And the Tutee (The Would-Be Support Teacher);• Observation During the Collegial Board Meetings, In Particular During the Development, Implementation, Verification, and Evaluation of The School's Annual Inclusion Plan and The Pupil's Iep;• Observation of Pupils with Disabilities About Behavioral, Relational, And Cognitive Aspects and The Use of Inclusive Teaching-Learning Approaches;• Observation of Relational Dynamics in The Context of The Section/Class and Evaluation of Their Impact on Educational Interventions;• Identification of the Student's Strengths and Weaknesses (Skills, Abilities, Areas of Development, Etc.) Based on The Educational and Didactic Intervention Defined;• Observation of The School's Structure Concerning Functionality, Accessibility, and Usability of The Various Environments, For Example, The Classroom, Internal and External School Spaces, Equipment Supplied to The School (Presence Of Assistive Technologies, Multimedia And/or Traditional Tools), The School Building (Centered/Decentralized Urban Position, Reachability, And Accessibility, Presence And Interventions To Remove Architectural Barriers, Etc.); And
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of The School's Organization: Relationship with The Pupil's Family, The Healthcare Stakeholder Involved, The Local Authorities, The Operators of Psycho-Socio-Assistance Services, and The Various Realities of The Territory (E.G. Voluntary, Associations, Etc.) In the Form of Collaborations on Projects Dedicated to School Inclusion With A Lifelong Approach.
<i>Active participation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration in The Design, Implementation, and Verification of the IEP, Educational Interventions Within the Classroom, And Defining Minimum or Differentiated Learning Objectives; • Elaboration, Planning, Realization and Verification of Didactic Interventions in Compliance With The Indications Of The IEP, Also With The Use Of Technologies Applied To Special Teaching; • Use of Prompts and Aids About the Specificity of the Psychic, Sensory, And/or Motor Impairments; • Selection, Choice, and Use of Tools, Including IT Tools (Software and Hardware) And Teaching Materials That Promote and Facilitate Learning and Skills Development; • Verification of The Functionality and Effectiveness of The Tools and Materials Adopted, Relating the Results Achieved; And • Analysis of Teaching Materials Including Textbooks, Strategies for Reducing Complexity, and The Usability of Means of Different Tools Functional to Inclusion.

Two fundamental phases emerged from the data on the indirect internship:

- a) Personal Re-Elaboration And
- b) Supervision, Each of Which Is Characterized by Specific Activities and Topics (As They Emerge From The Categories) (See Table 3).

Table 4.3 Indirect internship

Phases	Activities and topics
<i>Personal Re-Elaboration (Self and Co-Reflection)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection on Their Emotional Involvement in The Relationship with The Pupil;• Reflection on The Perception of Oneself and One's Role as A Future Support Teacher;• Critical Reflections on The Reasons for The Professional Choice and The Internship Experience; And• Reflection on The Skills Acquired During the Activities Carried Out at School About the Methodologies and Intervention Techniques.
<i>Supervision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflection on The Professionalization Process Carried Out During the Internship (Identifying the Significant Topics and Questioning Their Theoretical Significance); And• Self-Awareness of Having Matured a Critical and Reflective Professionalism, Which Sets the Conditions for Continually Questioning Oneself About One's Work.

5. Conclusion, Scope of Future Research, and Limitation

Future research needs to promote investigations about the mentor and/or tutor's role in supporting and promoting accompaniment through a peer-review approach. This can help to contribute to teachers' professional growth.

What emerges from this research indicates that the support and accompaniment of a mentor and/or tutor through peer review seems to be an approach that contributes to teachers' professional growth. Teacher training courses need expert teachers as mentors and tutors who provide collaborative and supportive peer-to-peer action. As such, it is necessary to adopt critical co-reflectivity as 'a habit of mind' and a 'modus operandi' (Andresen, 2000).

Teachers need to conduct self and co-evaluations so that they can utilize what emerges in their reflecting and thinking critically about the development of their competencies. Reflection,

for a teacher, is ‘an intentional act of the mind’ that makes teachers able to deeply investigate their practice (Lyons, 2002).

There are quite a lot of characteristics that make a good tutor and mentor, but, as emerges from the research, they are all equally necessary to provide support to novice teachers in terms of efficacy and effectiveness. For these reasons, it is important to clearly outline the role of tutor and mentor and define their profiles.

At the same time, it is fundamental to systematically introduce peer-to-peer review through the scaffolding of prepared tutors and mentors in all training courses for future teachers (OECD, 2009; 2019).

This activity can make a real difference in improving the quality of teachers’ training and significantly enhance teaching competencies.

The role of tutors and mentors refers to multiple meanings and the results of this study show that this role is also very complex (Sundli, 2007),

An interesting suggestion for future research in this field of education is to better understand the differences depending on the context, perspective, and dimension. This can be made with a comparison, for example, with the three basic models for mentoring identified by Wang & Odell (2002): the knowledge transmission model, the theory-and-practice connection model, and the collaborative inquiry model. These models are based on different kinds of mentor/mentee and tutor/tutee relationships.

Comparative perspectives are powerful because they help us to open perspectives, raise new questions, and construct new ways of acting.

Some of the limitations of this study are connected with the very specific type of participants: novice teachers within a specialization course aimed at supporting teachers for the classroom inclusion of students with disabilities. Unfortunately, there are not many other courses for Italian teachers that include the use of specific mentoring and tutoring activities during the internship.

As the field of education for mentors’ and tutors’ role in developing and supporting novice teachers’ competencies is under-researched, I would like to suggest the need for more research. In particular, I find a specific need for taking a more holistic look including the role of contextual factors.

Another interesting topic of research would be to study the effects of these internships in practice and how it affects new teachers' professional development and teaching.

Teacher training courses need expert mentors and tutors and this means that all the features shown in this study should be well integrated into the teachers' courses and internships and, at the same time, well balanced with theoretical and practical components.

This strengthens the possibilities for critical reflection and preparation for evidence-based and informed proposals and continuous professional development.

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