

Teacher Mentor in Secondary School: linking innovation in teaching, pre-service and in-service teacher training in Italy

Maria Bortoluzzi, University of Udine

1. Introduction

The recently established pre-service teacher training has created in Italy new professional figures of trainers that before did not exist, among them the mentor (or tutor) of trainees in schools. The present contribution intends to analyse their professional roles in Italian schools: the hypothesis at the basis of this study is that this new figure of trainer not only is it fundamental for pre-service teacher training, but can also contribute to introducing innovation and professional reflection in schools and become the link which has been missing so far in Italy between pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, school development and university applied research.

The contribution outlines the main professional characteristics of mentors in the Italian context, the roles that these teachers have in pre-service training and the way in which they perceive their role of trainers. Case-studies are qualitatively analysed: mentors were interviewed and questionnaires were used to gather information on their role in teacher training and their attitudes and beliefs about it.

The study shows how these professional characteristics (related to teaching and interpersonal competences) can be a fundamental asset both for the school and the university systems: they are essential for teaching practice and for establishing the link between university applied research and innovation in schools (provided that the newly established working relationship between school and university is maintained and its quality improved in the years to come).

2. The Italian context and the choice of data to analyse

Pre-service teacher training was only introduced in Italy in 1999 when Scuole di Specializzazione provided a long due institutionalised and academic course for trainee teachers (two-year course) (Decreto Ministeriale in *Università e Scuola*, 1998, 1999; Crivellari, 2002: 32-33). Before 1999, pre-service teacher training consisted in non-obligatory courses and a state exam that gave access to a teaching post. Practical teacher training in schools, obligatory only from 1999, takes up a quarter of the whole training time over the two-year course. Given the lack of previous experience in this field, mentors in school are an entirely new figure of trainer that before did not exist and developed spontaneously without specific and consistent guidelines. In the past four years mentors have been doing mainly voluntary work: only rarely have they been paid for their work and, in general, they are not really recognised for their professional skills and competences. Additionally, they have not been specifically trained before becoming mentors, as happens in countries where teaching practice in schools is well-established (Britain, for instance). The choice of mentors has been made over the months and years assessing the quality of the work they did with the trainees. At first, therefore, the category of mentors was self-selected (some teachers volunteered at the beginning, some were coaxed into mentoring because they were well-known as good and experienced teachers, others joined later because they saw that their colleagues found the activity professionally challenging and rewarding).

In this fluid and multifaceted context, the best mentors have worked with continuity for SSIS and have attracted to the job other motivated and experienced teachers. Given that there is no specific official professional profile for this trainer in Italy, it seems important to analyse its characteristics and identify some common professional qualities that make these mentors

central for one of the most relevant and innovative aspects of teacher training in Italy: trainee practice in schools.

The type of research chosen to investigate characteristics and roles of mentors is qualitative and not quantitative because the analysis looks at the professional characteristics of good or excellent training practice: the aim of this study is not to find out characteristics across the board, but the salient professional aspects that can best contribute to the success of teaching practice in school for the trainees. The choice of mentors was made on the bases of three variables: the feed-back questionnaires of the trainees about their own training in schools, the interviews with the trainees at the end of each series of training sessions, the interviews with the mentors before and after the series of training sessions. This triangulation contributed to identifying the mentors who have offered the trainees opportunities for good or excellent practice: 7 mentors were selected and asked to fill in a questionnaire and they were also interviewed in the case in which clarifications about their answers were needed. The way in which the data have been analysed and the theoretical framework of reference for my study are described in the next section.

3. The framework of analysis

The best mentors in school have offered the trainees the opportunity to pass from theoretical knowledge to experiential knowledge constructed autonomously through a long process of learning and professional, personal, relational development. What Williams and Burden say for teaching can be also applied to teacher training:

"As teachers we do not just act as gateways to knowledge because we ourselves represent and even embody the curriculum. We convey not just what we know, but our position towards it, the personal ramifications and implications which it has for us. At the same time, teachers experience an *engagement* with their learners out of which further constructions emerge. Both teachers and learners reshape their ways of understanding, their knowledge structures and the meanings that they attribute to events and ideas as a result of this interactive process. They also continually reconstruct their views of each other." (Williams and Burden, 1997: 53)

This correspondence between the two processes of learning and teaching and learning and training influenced the choice of van Lier's (1996) basic principles of the curriculum as the framework of analysis for the professional characteristics of mentors. Linking 'the basic *epistemological* questions of language learning (the knowledge base of our field) to the axiological or ethical issues which [...] concern most teachers (our *values*)' (ibid.: 10), van Lier identifies the three basic principles of the curriculum as Awareness, Autonomy, Authenticity and a fourth A which is Achievement (including Assessment and Accountability). The joint consideration of knowledge and values makes these variables suitable as a framework of analysis for the data of the present study, as explained in the next section.

4. The first stage of analysis

The analysis of the data is in progress; so far, the initial analysis carried out using van Lier's categories was based on the individual interviews I regularly have (as *supervisore di tirocinio*) with the mentors when I meet them to talk about the teaching practice in school of their trainees. These interviews, therefore, were not specifically designed for the present study (as was the questionnaire), but were routine interviews with the mentors about the trainees' teaching practice. A diary was kept of these interviews and the data collected have been used to pilot the framework of analysis. The framework has proved suitable for this kind of study and has helped categorising rather complex and varied materials gathered during the routine interviews.

The following list presents the sub-categories I found during the initial stage of analysis of my data (the routine interviews with the mentors). These sub-categories are not present in van Lier (1996), but they have been identified specifically for the data of this study. All characteristics refer to roles, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs as expressed by the mentors.

1. Awareness

- Awareness of the importance of teaching practice in professional training
- Awareness of the complexity of their job as mentors
- Awareness of the variety of methodologies and teaching strategies
- Awareness of the importance of the teacher's reflection on professional choices (teaching modalities, contents, aims, etc)
- Awareness of the relational dynamics involving students, trainees and mentor
- Awareness of affective aspects of teaching and training

2. Autonomy

- Autonomy in the choice of methodologies, strategies and techniques
- Sense of responsibility

3. Authenticity

- Motivation in teaching
- Real involvement in the learning process
- Authentic ability to communicate
- Respect for individual differences and personal choices

4. Achievement

- Ability to reflect critically on the results obtained in class
 - Reflecting on the single results of the work done in class by the trainees
 - Reflecting on the global results of the training experience for the trainees
- Ability to reflect critically on their own work
 - As class teachers
 - As mentors
- Ability to analyse the teacher training practice and offer suggestions to improve its implementation
- Ability to look for and create opportunities in professional development.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the data so far seems to show very clearly that the mentors in school are the professional figure that can represent the link between pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, teaching innovation and university applied research. The data clearly show that mentors are 'reflective practitioner' (Farrell, 1998) aware of the complexity of their professional roles and the delicate balance of skills which are needed during training. Efficient and dedicated mentors possess the interest for continuous learning, abilities for establishing collaborative relationship with colleagues, organizational skills, strategies of self-reflection and self-monitoring, interest in finding new solutions to teaching issues and problems. They are also efficient communicators who value the affective and interpersonal aspects of teaching and training.

The analysis of the questionnaires might confirm these results or yield new and unexpected information. The questionnaire and the outcomes of this second stage of analysis will be presented during the Round Table.

Bibliography

- Crivellari C. 2002. SSIS: Il quadro istituzionale. In Bonetta G. et al. (a cura di) *Università e Formazione degli insegnanti: non si parte da zero*: 25-35. Udine: Forum Editrice.
- Farrell, T. 1998. Reflective Teaching. The principles and practices. *English Teaching Forum*, 36,4: 10-17.
- Van Lier, L. 1996. *Interaction in the Language Curriculum: Awareness, autonomy and authenticity*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Università e scuola*, III, 2/N, 1998 (contenente anche il Decreto Ministeriale del 26/5/1998)
- Università e scuola*, IV, 2/R, 1999.
- Williams, M., Burden, R. L. 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: C.U.P.