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Mentoring practices in workplace-based professional preparation: a critical analysis of policy developments in the Italian context

Lucia Balduzzi & Arianna Lazzari

In recent years, the issue of early childhood staff professionalisation has been taking an increasingly prominent position in policy-making and academic debates at the international level. Despite this growing interest, studies investigating the content and delivery of professional preparation programmes for early childhood practitioners are still quite rare in European literature. Against this background, the article will describe and critically analyse the characterising features of the university degree for the professional preparation of pre-school teachers in Italy, with a special focus on workplace-based training. In particular, the theoretical underpinnings and shared understandings related to the implementation of mentoring practices within the university course will be explored by drawing on the data collected from documentary sources and interviews with local experts. Findings highlight that the main strengths of mentoring practices within such a programme are: (a) the extended placement periods in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings which allow prospective teachers to live the culture of practice; (b) the critically reflective component of tutoring practices, which combines theoretical and experiential learning; (c) the strong partnerships built at the local level between ECEC services and universities, which generates reciprocal influences between academic research and educational practices and thus sustains pedagogical innovation. At the same time, the fact that the mentoring role of placement tutors in ECEC institutions is not adequately supported in terms of competence development and workload allocation might potentially undermine the benefits of workplace-based training for students. In addition, the contextualisation of our analysis within the broader landscape of national policy developments in the field of ECEC staff professionalisation revealed that the increased academisation of pre-school teachers professional preparation might lead – in the long term – to a risk of ‘schoolification’ of pedagogical practices enacted within ECEC services. In regards to these issues, the article will raise questions for further consideration and debate.

Keywords: professional preparation; workplace-based learning; pre-school teachers; university; early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Introduction

The important role played by initial professional development in promoting practitioners’ competence and in enhancing the quality of educational and care practices in the work with young children has increasingly been recognised in international policy debates (European Commission 2011; OECD 2012). At the same time, policy

measures aimed to improve the professional education of prospective early childhood staff have been undertaken in many countries, displaying a great variety of qualification and competence requirements as well as a richness of training approaches and strategies implemented in order to achieve them (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). In this respect, findings from the CoRe study –involving seven case studies carried out in European Union (EU) member states –showed that a common characteristic of successful professionalisation programmes is the combination and mutual interplay of theory and practice sustaining the development of reflective competences that are acknowledged to be at the core of early childhood professionalism (Urban et al. 2011a). The study further highlights that a close collaboration between training institutions and early childhood services is required in order to ensure an equal and reciprocal relationship between theorising and hands-on activities in both learning environments in a way that sustains the competence of prospective practitioners to critically reflect on their own practice (Urban et al. 2011b). Despite the fact that such an approach to the professional education of early childhood staff is widely recognised in international literature (Bayer 2001; Nigris 2004; Barbier 2006), the role played by early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions in workplace-based professional preparation programmes remains largely under-researched. Against this background, the article explores how the mentoring role of early childhood staff is conceptualised and implemented within the university degree for the professional preparation of pre-school teachers in Italy, which is compulsory for all staff working in the *scuola dell'infanzia* (ECEC institution attended by children aged 3–6) and which confer them a qualified teacher status. In the first part of the article, we will provide an overview of the Italian ECEC system and staff professionalisation requirements along with a critical contextualisation of the issue explored in the light of recent policy trends and developments. In the second part, we will describe and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of workplace-based professional preparation within the current degree for the professional preparation of pre-school teachers by drawing on data collected from documentary sources and interviews with local experts. In the concluding section, we will critically discuss the findings of our analysis in the light of the current national debate on the professionalisation of teachers that is at the core of ongoing school reforms.

Background: ECEC institutions and their workforce

In Italy, ECEC is provided within a split system. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for early childhood services attended by children under three years of age, while the Ministry of Education is responsible for services attended by children aged from 3 to 6 (compulsory school age). Regions and municipalities have the administrative responsibility for the regulation and funding of services for under-threes, of which the most common type of provision is called *nido d'infanzia*. These services are attended by 13.5% of the national child population under three years of age, although important regional disparities exist in attendance rates (varying from 27.3% in Emilia-Romagna to between 1 and 2% in Calabria) due to the fact that the administrative responsibility for the planning, construction, regulation and management of the 0–3 services lies with municipal and regional authorities (ISTAT 2014).

The ECEC services attended by children from 3 to 6 years of age are called *scuole dell'infanzia*. The pre-school sector is organised according to a tripartite

system, which encompasses state, municipal and private (mostly Catholic not-for-profit) providers. The state took over complete responsibility for the pre-school sector in 1968, by integrating previously existing institutions (mostly run by municipalities and Catholic providers) within the national education system and by ensuring the generalisation of the service through the expansion of state-maintained institutions. Currently the *scuola dell'infanzia*, although not compulsory, is a well-established educational institution which is attended by approximately 96% of the 3–6 year olds across the country. The majority of *scuola dell'infanzia* are public: approximately 56% are run by the state (mostly attached to primary schools and under the supervision of their directors) and 10% by municipalities, whereas 34% are run by private providers (ISTAT 2012). Since 2000 all non-state pre-schools (municipal and private not-for-profit) that meet certain quality standards – in relation to staffing, educational planning, collegial participative bodies and the inclusion of children with special needs – are officially recognised as part of the national educational system (*paritarie*) and therefore are eligible for annual financial support through state subsidies.

As ECEC is provided within a split system, the key features of the early years workforce – professional preparation, qualification requirements and status – vary in relation to the segment of the sector in which practitioners are working.

The core practitioners working in services for under-threes (*nidi*) are commonly called *educatori* (educators) and the minimum qualification level required to work for children under three is set at ISCED-3 (a five-year upper secondary school diploma in educational studies). Although, there is consensus among experts that the professional preparation of early childhood educators should be raised to bachelor level, there is not as yet any national law setting the qualification requirements for *educatori* (Mantovani 2010). In local legislation, qualification requirements are still set at upper secondary level despite the fact that a university qualification route for the professional preparation of educators (three-year university degree) has been available, since 1998 at some state Universities (Bologna, Firenze, Padova, Verona, Milano-Bicocca). To date, the three-year university degree for *educatore di nido* is still optional.

The core practitioners working with children aged 3–6 in pre-schools are called *insegnanti di scuola dell'infanzia* (pre-school teachers). Since the Ministry of Education Decree enacted in 2010, all prospective core practitioners employed in state pre-school institutions are required to hold a five-year university degree (ISCED-5) in educational studies (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria, SFP*), conferring an official teacher status which allows them to work either in pre-primary or primary school (*insegnante di scuola dell'infanzia e di scuola primaria*).

Given the complex and fragmented landscape of ECEC service provision and staff professional preparation in the Italian context, the article will focus specifically on the nationally relevant workplace-based training (*tirocinio*) provided within the five-year university degree for the initial education of pre-school and primary school teachers. In order to provide a meaningful account of the characterising features of workplace-based training within teacher professional preparation programmes, we will first review trends and developments related to professionalisation and recruitment policies, which have been taking place in Italy over the last two decades.

Methodology

The methodological approach used for the analysis of policy documents was critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013). The analytical tools adopted within such a

methodological approach – problematisation, recontextualisation and argumentation – contributed to guide our critique of educational policies by focusing particularly on policy discourses and on the relations between these discourses and other social elements (ideologies, theorisations, institutional and professional identities underpinning teachers’ preparation programmes). In this sense, the use of critical discourse analysis allowed us not only to describe existing realities but also to evaluate them – by judging the extent to which they match up to the educational values that are taken to be fundamental in the ECEC field – and to explain them – by constantly relating them to the social, cultural and political contexts within which they have been produced.

The professional preparation of pre-school teachers: trends and developments

Up to 1998, Italy was the only country in Europe not to have a post-secondary or higher education professional training for schoolteachers. Up to this time the requirement was an upper secondary level specialist qualification (ISCED 3A) obtained by attending a four-year course at an upper secondary school called *scuola magistrale* or *istituto magistrale*. Within this qualification, the number of hours spent in work placements was negligible. Teachers’ professional development took place mainly on the job, through attendance at in-service training courses to which a certain amount of non-contact hours were allocated within working agreements (up to 200 h a year). More specifically, the responsibility for the professionalisation of early childhood teachers was devolved to the bodies responsible for running the institutions within which they were working:

- A national agency called *Servizio Nazionale per la Scuola Materna* was responsible for the in-service training of early childhood teachers working in state-maintained pre-schools;
- Local authorities were responsible for the professional development of early childhood teachers and educators working in municipal services (*nidi* and *scuole dell’infanzia*);
- It was up to each private provider to offer in-service training opportunities to the personnel employed in its ECEC settings.

As highlighted in the Italian country profile within the SEEPRO study (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010), the Italian ECEC system has built its strength through significant investment in continuing professional development, by granting ECEC staff a quite considerable amount of paid working hours for attending professional development initiatives, collegial meetings among staff and meetings with parents. Therefore, the provision of workplace-based professional development initiatives took over – to a certain extent – the role of compensating for a general lack of initial preparation, which was perceived to be inadequate to promote the competencies needed by early childhood teachers for working with children and their families (Lazzari, Picchio, and Musatti 2013).

Over the last two decades, several initiatives have been undertaken in order to raise the qualification of pre-school teachers and to make professional preparation more homogenous across state and publicly funded provision (municipal and private NFP pre-schools). In 1998, the requirements for the initial professional preparation

of teachers working in both pre-primary and primary school were upgraded to a four-year university degree (ISCED 5A). Therefore – between 1998 and the latest reform in 2010 (MIUR 2010) – pre-school teachers were required to hold a degree in Primary Education Sciences (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria, SFP*), which allowed them to teach in any public and private pre-school recognised by the state. This degree was structured into two two-year phases or cycles:

- The first two-year phase was built upon a generalist curriculum (education, psychology, sociology and anthropology) for the common preparation of pre- and primary school teachers;
- The second two-year cycle was built upon a specialised curriculum focused on early childhood pedagogy and learning (literacy, numeracy, natural sciences, art, music, play and movement);
- Additionally, special needs teachers were required to attend two semesters in special needs/inclusive education.

The flexible combination of the two-year pathways within the degree was designed to encourage educational continuity between pre- and primary school settings through the promotion of a transdisciplinary approach for the professional preparation of teachers. As noted by Nigris (2007), the salient features of teachers' professional preparation within the university course were:

- A multidisciplinary approach grounded on the balance between human sciences and curricular subjects,
- An integrated curriculum that combines theoretical and experiential learning,
- A strong partnership with schools.

In particular, the prominent role given to experiential learning taking place within project work activities carried out in small groups (*laboratori*) and in field practice (*tirocinio*) has been identified as the main strength of the four-year university course (Kanizsa 2004; Galliani and Felisatti 2005). In small group workshops, prospective teachers had the possibility to link theoretical knowledge to practice through the simulation of educational projects that they would have implemented during their placements in ECEC or school settings (Galliani and Felisatti 2005). The small size of workshops' groups (maximum 20 students) and the recruitment of experienced teachers as facilitators not only allowed frequent interactions among participants, but also aimed at promoting an alternative approach to the construction of professional knowledge through guided collective reflectivity on educational practice (Kanizsa 2004). During the work placements, prospective teachers were called to engage in three subsequent phases: field observations in ECEC and school settings, cooperation with class teachers and taking responsibility for implementing an educational project in the class. The analysis of field practice within the university was carried out in small groups coordinated by a supervisor who provided prospective teachers with methodological tools such as observation protocols, professional diaries and action plans aimed at enhancing their reflectivity on observed and enacted practices (Supervisor di Bologna e Modena-Reggio Emilia 2006).

It has been documented that the strong workplace-based component of the degree was considered to be advantageous both by the universities and the ECEC/school settings, despite the fact that it was the first ever experiment – carried out on

a large scale – where training and educational institutions systematically worked together for the professional preparation of prospective teachers (Nigris 2007).

However, the structure of the university courses providing teachers' initial preparation has undergone major changes within the recent reform introduced in September 2011 (MIUR 2010). Within this reform the initial preparation of pre-school teachers has been upgraded to master's level (five-year university degree), with the same university route to be attended by pre-school, primary and special needs teachers. Despite the fact that the strengths of the former four-year course – the integrated curriculum based upon a reciprocal interplay of theory and practice and the partnerships built up with the educational institutions – have been maintained in the new professional preparation course, the changes introduced by the new reform are looked upon with a certain apprehension by experts in the field. In fact, it is feared that the length and the structure of the new qualification pathway will widen the gap between educators' and pre-schools teachers' professionalism, undermining the continuity and a common pedagogical culture within early childhood education (Mantovani 2010). In particular, the fact that a narrow disciplinary approach has become predominant and that a broader pedagogical approach to learning has been left at the margin is interpreted as potentially producing a 'schoolification' of early childhood education (Lazzari and Balduzzi 2014).

From the policy documents and relevant academic literature reviewed in this section, certain trends of continuity and change can be identified. Up until the end of the Nineties, teachers' professionalisation was mostly carried out 'on the job' through the provision of in-service training courses which required compulsory attendance. On the one hand, it could be said that the state took over the responsibility for the professional development of low qualified teachers by allocating a certain amount of paid hours (non-contact time) to the attendance of in-service training within national working agreements. On the other hand, it might also be noted that teachers' professional development opportunities were highly variegated and fragmented, in addition to the fact that extreme heterogeneity existed among pre-school providers in relation to the professionalisation of staff (for example, whereas municipal institutions developed a coherent system based upon pedagogical guidance and collegial revision of practices, in-service training within state-maintained institutions was mostly provided in the form of short-term courses to be attended by practitioners on an individual basis).

The turn of the century witnessed a radical shift in teacher professionalisation policies. Initial professional preparation became compulsory for all prospective teachers wishing to work in state-maintained pre-schools and, at the same time, staffing requirements were introduced in order to raise the qualification level of personnel working in publicly subsidised provision. In parallel, as soon as the four-year university degree for teachers' professional preparation (*Scienze della Formazione Primaria*) became mandatory, the amount of paid non-contact time allocated in teachers' working agreements within state-maintained pre-schools decreased dramatically (from up to 200 to only 40 h per year) and the attendance of in-service professional development opportunities became voluntary (although separate agreements still exist for publicly subsidised provision). Therefore, teacher professionalisation shifted from being predominantly focused on training on-the-job to becoming mainly focused on initial professional preparation as a consequence of higher qualification requirements introduced by national legislation. However, one of the main features characterising the newly introduced four-year university course in *Scienze*

della Formazione Primaria was the reciprocal interplay between theory and practice that was built in partnership with ECEC/school settings and which consolidated the workplace-based training component in the professional preparation of prospective teachers. In addition, the degree sought to find a balance between a generalist pedagogic approach and a more specific subject-based didactic approach that would meet the professional needs of both pre-school and primary schools teachers. This balance may be shifting with the recent introduction of the five-year degree pathway for both pre-school and primary school teachers. The following section will analyse in more details the content and structure of the new university course by focusing specifically on its workplace-based training component (*tirocinio*).

The mentoring role of ECEC institutions in the initial preparation of pre-school teachers

In the following section we will explore the role of placement within the master's degree in Primary Education Science from the perspectives of the actors involved – ECEC and university institutions – drawing both on an analysis of documentary sources and on interviews with key informants. In particular the regulatory framework, binding agreements and practices that give concrete application to the mentoring function of ECEC institutions in teachers' professionalisation will be critically evaluated in relation to their strengths and weaknesses as expressed in national debates and in the views of the experts interviewed.

Theoretical underpinnings of workplace-based training practices

The changes introduced by the new reforms are aimed to better align pedagogical knowledge, educational methodologies and didactic strategies across pre-school and primary school institutions through a single training pathway for prospective pre-school teachers, primary school teachers, and special needs teachers (*insegnante di sostegno*). The new curriculum is designed to take into account the strengths of the previous four-year university degree (project work, small-group workshop activities) and the strong partnerships built up with pre-schools and schools (work placement and analysis of field practices). It can be said that these characteristics have been enhanced in the new curriculum, and additionally supplemented by the acquisition of foreign language skills (English language requirements set at B2 level¹), of digital skills and of the educational competences necessary to support the inclusion of children with special needs (which were compulsory only for special needs teachers in the previous degree).

Since its establishment within the SFP curriculum, workplace-based training (*tirocinio*) – along with small-group workshop activities (*laboratori*) – played a crucial role in connecting the theoretical level of knowledge acquisition gained through the university lectures, and the level of practices taking place in the everyday life of ECEC/school institutions. Whereas the lecture component represents the theoretical moment of knowledge, centred on issues and problems, the workshops are the place of simulation and planning of teaching activities, whereas the placement corresponds to the moment of practice enactment within the ECEC/school context. Thus, workplace-based training becomes the privileged meeting place between theory and practice within a recursive process where students have the opportunity to actively

construct professional knowledge starting from the reflection on their educational experiences.

Despite the fact that each Italian university has developed different organizational models and operational tools related to placement activities, at national level there is a shared vision that identifies workplace-based training as characterised by a 'learning by doing' process based on the student's experience. In the ECEC/school context, the student's experience is constructed starting from the analysis of the educational situation; it proceeds with the planning of educational initiatives and culminates with the implementation of educational activities and the reflection upon them. Such a process combines all the aspects of the SPF course: the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, the competent use of methodological tools, and the exercise of critical reflection.

Within such a vision, the teacher is conceptualised as a competent and reflective practitioner (Schon 1983) and the placement within ECEC/school institutions represents the field in which students can experiment and enhance their reflective competence. In fact, only a full immersion in field experience can nurture reflective competence, according to Schon's definition of reflection as 'knowing-in-action': 'When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he [she] perceives as unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his intuitive understanding of them, his [her] experimenting is at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing. The three functions are fulfilled by the very same actions' (1987, 72). Therefore, the understanding underlying teachers' workplace-based training is that a teacher's professional preparation should focus not only on the acquisition of specific theoretical and practical knowledge, but rather the relationship between and the interweaving of such types of knowledge. The purpose of teachers' initial education is the formation of a *habitus* (Perrenould 1996) that represent the set of schemes of perception, evaluation, of thought and actions, which all together constitute the structure through which teachers cope with the huge variety of everyday situations in educational contexts. From this point of view, prospective teachers' professionalism can be fostered only in close connection to the culture of ECEC and school institutions. In fact, if professional learning is considered as an incidental by-product of participants in a specific professional community rather than an isolated event (Lave and Wenger 1991), the situated learning taking place within students' placement in ECEC and school settings plays a crucial role in the initial preparation of teachers, since it allows them to gradually absorb and to become absorbed in the 'culture of practice'. For this reason, prospective teachers in placement have not only to be aware of the meaning of educational practices implemented by their mentoring teachers in their classroom, but also of the educational community's beliefs in terms of organisation, rules and roles. These aspects are linked to important goals of the workplace-based training of prospective teachers, namely the observation of institutional, collective practices and the analysis of the ECEC/schools' policies and documentation.

The prominent place given to work placement in the new five-year university degree is underlined by the fact that 600 h are allocated for practice within the new curriculum, whereas in the previous four-year pathway these were limited to only 400 h. In the following sections, the structure and content of workplace-based training within the new master's degree in SFP will be illustrated in more detail.

Content and delivery of workplace-based training activities

The Education Ministry Decree no. 249 (MIUR 2010) defines a fairly structured curriculum for the master's degree in SFP; for this reason, the training pathways provided by Italian universities for the professional preparation of pre-school and primary school teachers are fairly homogeneous. At the same time, universities have a certain degree of autonomy in determining the cultural and methodological approach to teachers' initial professional preparation within the course implementation. In this perspective, the relationship between each university and the local context of ECEC services, schools and others cultural and social agencies significantly relates to the characterisation of the quality of curriculum. For instance, certain universities are able to sign specific agreements with municipalities and regional school offices (responsible for state schools) in order to extend their collaboration for the professional development of in-service teachers, or for the experimentation of innovative educational tools and the implementation of action research projects. Through these agreements, universities influence the cultural pedagogical background of local ECEC services and – at the same time – university research has a chance to be more sensitive and responsive to the problems and critical educational issues raised by ECEC services at the local level.

According to MD 249/2010, the master's degree in SFP provides 600 h of compulsory placement (*tirocinio*), starting from the second year of course. Placement activities increase gradually from the second to the fifth year of course and, each year, workplace-based training experiences must be documented in a mandatory report. The report, compiled in the final year of the course, is also to be a part of the thesis dissertation, which will be publicly discussed at the end of the degree course and through which the students will obtain their qualified teacher status (*abilitazione*).

The structure of placement activities is aimed to provide students with a progressive knowledge of ECEC/school institutions and their educational environment. This will guide prospective teachers' commitment towards a gradual assumption of responsibility, redirecting it from the initial moments of classroom observation to the subsequent involvement in the processes of activity planning, implementation and evaluation. By the second year of study, the student is placed in the position of listening, of observing and of examining the practices enacted by the professionals in charge of developing and carrying out educational activities within pre- and primary school institutions (class and special needs teachers). In such a situation, prospective teachers' professional learning starts to take shape through reflecting on observed experiences of teachers and children engaged in educational processes. A further element that represents a conceptual basis for the design of the structure of the placement is the assumption that educational reality is a phenomenon characterised by complexity (Morin 1999, 2000). Starting from the complexity of each educational situation, every decision requires a degree of flexibility and feasibility that can be developed only under the conditions of real life, and not in the objectivity of scientific research laboratories (Frabboni, Guerra, and Lodini 1995). The student is therefore invited to participate directly in the culture of the ECEC/school institution within which the placement takes place: in the first instance, through the observation and the analysis of those elements that can be considered 'institutional artefacts' (institutional policies, educational plans and documentation), and secondly through peripheral participation in its relational environment shaping professional practices (Lave and Wenger 1991).

In this perspective, the placement is an important experience to learn about the school from 'inside' the organisation; allowing the student to start his/her reflexive path that will develop along his/her teaching career. At the same time, the placement is also seen an excellent opportunity to create an alliance between universities and ECEC/school institutions at local level, to bring practice-based research in everyday educational contexts and to elaborate innovative didactic practice around specific issues that are of joint interest for students on placement and their mentors/tutors in the classroom. In this sense, one of the pillars of the organisation of placement activities is that the entire academic board of professors and tutors participates in the design and implementation of the practitioners' activities, which consist of providing students with orientation, developing relationships with the ECEC/school institutions, and supporting student placement projects related to different subject areas.

The placement is distributed over the last four years of the master's degree according to two two-year cycles. In order to allow prospective teachers to acquire specific knowledge and skills for each school level (pre-primary and primary), it is generally recommended that students attend workplace-based activities in both the *scuola dell'infanzia* and the *scuola primaria*, but within the same institution across each two-year period. Workplace-based training consists of two different kinds of activities. The 'indirect placement' (*tirocinio indiretto*) refers to all those activities that students are required to carry out in order to prepare, organise, document and reflect critically upon their placement experience. Whereas, the 'direct placement' (*tirocinio diretto*) refers to all those activities that students undertake in ECEC/school settings: these include both observation and teaching activities carried out either in the classrooms or during collegial meetings (including meetings with parents). Approximately 70% of the time allocated to workplace-based training is to be spent in direct placement activities, whereas the remaining 30% is dedicated to indirect placement activities.

The methodological and didactic tools offered to the students in order carry out observation, planning, documentation and evaluation of educational practices are identified among those most used in ECEC/school institutions at local level; these are combined with tools developed by the academic board of SFP professors and by the university tutors or mentors. This opens many possibilities to experiment with innovative educational tools for planning, documenting and evaluating ECEC/schools projects within a close inter-institutional collaboration aimed at the growing professionalisation of prospective teachers. For this purpose, student's workplace learning within each of the four training periods is regularly evaluated both during placement activities (interim evaluation) and at the end (final evaluation). These evaluations are jointly carried by the coordinator tutor/mentor at the university and by the teacher tutor/mentor in the classroom. The conceptualisation of these two roles, along with their perceived strengths and weaknesses, are further described and analysed below.

Tutoring roles for the implementation of mentoring practices

The elaboration and development of mentoring practices within the SFP degree are a responsibility of the entire Master Academic Board, although the implementation of such practices is mostly devolved to those professionals who play a bridging role between universities and ECEC/schools institutions (called *tutor*). Under the law

regulating the five-year SFP degree (MIUR 2010), three different professional pro-files are involved in the organisation, mentoring and evaluation of student's work-place-based training activities: the organising tutors (*tutor organizzatori*), the coordinating tutors (*tutor coordinatori*) and the students' tutors (*tutor*), i.e. those with a mentoring role in the classroom.

Whereas the organising and coordinating tutors are experienced teachers who are selected for temporary secondment to the university following a public exam consisting of an interview and of the evaluation of their professional curriculum and publications, the tutors who are mentoring students on placement within ECEC and school settings are selected by school directors on a voluntary basis. In addition, different roles and functions are associated with each distinct professional profile. The organising tutors are responsible for managing activities regarding the inter-institutional collaboration between the university and the ECEC/school settings and for coordinating the allocation of students' groups to the coordinator tutors. The coordinating tutors are in charge of facilitating students' choices in relation to their placement in ECEC/school institutions and of guiding students in setting the objectives of their training plan. Throughout the placement period, coordinator tutors provide students with the tools for carrying out observations, for drawing up action plans and for evaluating educational practices. In this sense, the mentoring role of coordinator tutors is to support prospective teachers across the different stages of competent practice development such as:

- The analysis of the situation in which they are operating (observation of children and teachers in educational contexts),
- The elaboration of an educational project of their choice to be implemented by adopting didactic methodologies that are coherent with its objectives,
- The documentation of the implemented project and a critical evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

At the end of placement, students are required to produce a report in which they describe and reflect upon their experience with children, families and colleagues in ECEC/school settings. During this final stage, the coordinating tutor is responsible for evaluating students' placement activities in the light of the reflective report produced by each student and of the synthetic report compiled by the student tutor/mentor responsible for supervising student's activities in the classroom.

Given the complexity of the mentoring functions that are accomplished by university tutors, teachers who aspire to cover this role must have held a permanent position in ECEC/school institutions for at least five years before applying for this position. In addition, the time span for teachers who are seconded at the university as organising or coordinating tutors is limited to four years in order to preserve their bridging role and to avoid the risk of distancing themselves from practice for a prolonged period. In contrast, the professional role and responsibilities of students' tutors within ECEC/school settings are less clearly defined within the national law regulating the SFP degree (MIUR 2010). The tasks of students' tutors/mentors are mostly associated with the 'welcoming' of prospective teachers, introducing them to the everyday life of the classroom and accompanying them towards the direct management of educational processes through coaching and supervision. For accomplishing these tasks, ECEC/school tutors or mentors need to be prepared to discuss their own practice with students, to actively guide and support them in planning and

implementing educational activities in the classroom and to engage in a critical and constructive dialogue with students in order to promote their reflectivity.

From a critical analysis of the text reported in the national law (MIUR 2010) it emerges that the different roles, tasks and responsibilities associated with mentoring practices are not assigned to different typologies of professionals (for example, tutor, supervisor, mentor ...), but rather to one typology of professional whose profile is specialised according to the assigned functions (organising tutor, coordinating tutor and students' tutor). This choice can be interpreted in different ways: on the one hand, it could underpin the intention of avoiding the creation of hierarchies among professionals by equating educational with organisational functions. On the other hand, the choice of defining the professional roles of teachers seconded to university by focusing predominantly on organisational and coordinating aspects could possibly lead to a bureaucratisation of their functions, such as focusing predominantly on connecting students and schools, or on the evaluation of the placement activities according to predetermined criteria. This may carry the risk that, in the long run, mentoring practices will be mostly devolved to student's tutors in ECEC/school settings and that the gap between mentoring and evaluating student's workplace activities will increase. This means that the process-oriented elements that have traditionally been at the core of students' placement evaluation might be dismissed in favour of more standardised forms of assessment. An additional risk associated with the bureaucratisation of mentoring procedures might also be the widespread dissemination of standardised observation and evaluation tools (such as checklists, rating scales ...) over the more process-oriented tools (professional diaries, pedagogical documentation including visual and narrative accounts of children's experiences) that are currently used to support prospective teachers' pedagogical growth through critically reflective practices.

In many universities, the contribution of tutors has been crucial for the development of such methodological tools (reflective diaries, professional portfolios, observation protocols and pedagogical documentation) over time and for the collection of a huge variety of documentary sources produced by students on placement. Such materials are rich and diverse, since their development is strongly connected to local pedagogical traditions. In general, it is possible to assume that the professional background and the educational views of university tutors have a certain impact on the placement framework adopted by each university, as well as on the relationship established with local ECEC/school institutions in the local area. It is remarkable, however, that no systematic research has been carried out – at national level – documenting and analysing this variety of approaches and richness of empirical materials. This weakness in research and dissemination of existing good practices – combined with the risk of increased bureaucratisation of tutors' roles within university – might actually contribute to further expose mentoring practices to the risk of standardisation and isolation from the contexts of local ECEC/school institutions.

Conclusions

In this article, we have focused specifically on the analysis of mentoring practices in the workplace-based professional preparation of pre-school and primary school teachers in Italy. Our analysis is contextualised in the light of long-term policy developments concerning teachers' professionalisation, which led to the recent

reform of the SFP university degree at master level. Within this framework, relevant literature has been reviewed, highlighting how the reciprocal interplay between theory and practice as well as the inter-institutional collaboration established between universities and ECEC/school institutions could be considered as major qualifying features of teachers' workplace-based training in the Italian context. By exploring in more detail the role of placement within the recent reform of the SFP course from the perspectives of the actors involved within university and ECEC institutions, we have sought to identify strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring practices currently implemented for the professional preparation of prospective teachers.

The findings emerging from the analysis of documentary sources and interviews with local experts pointed out that the main strengths of the present system of workplace-based learning within teachers' initial preparation are:

- (1) The considerable amount of time dedicated to placement within the degree which allows students to familiarise themselves with the educational environment of pre-school and primary school institutions and to assume ownership of the culture of practice elaborated within such institutions;
- (2) The methodological tools provided to students for the analysis of educational practices (observation, planning, documentation and evaluation) and the joint support provided by coordinator and ECEC/school tutors in enhancing prospective teachers' reflective competences;
- (3) The strong partnerships built at the local level between ECEC services, schools and universities, which generate reciprocal influences between academic research and educational practices, thus sustaining pedagogical innovation.

At the same time, the findings of our analysis have identified weaknesses and potential risks associated with the implementation of the new system of workplace-based training. On the one hand, the fact that the functions assigned to university tutors are increasingly defined in terms of organisational and coordinating tasks could possibly lead to a bureaucratisation of their role, with the implicit risk that, in the long run, mentoring practices will be mostly devolved to student's tutors in ECEC/school settings.

On the other hand, the fact that the mentoring role of tutors operating in ECEC/school institutions is not adequately supported in terms of competence development and workload allocation might potentially undermine the benefits of workplace-based training for students.

To conclude, the contextualisation of our analysis within the broader landscape of national policy developments in the field of ECEC staff professionalisation revealed that the increased academisation of pre-school teachers professional preparation might lead – in the long term – to the risk of a schoolification of the pedagogical practices enacted within ECEC services.

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Note

1. Within the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) the B2 level corresponds to an independent user at vantage or upper intermediate level (www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf).

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