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## Inspiring and Preparing a Comprehensive View of the Professional Role of Educator: A Simulated Traineeship Experience

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**ABSTRACT:** *The simulated traineeship experience that inspires this text has involved second and third year-students of the Sciences of Education Course in the field of the nursery and childcare services during the first COVID-19 lockdown. It has followed a 'Simulated Educational Enterprise' model that has been successful in high schools in the first years of 2000. In this case, a training space has been set up, that was preparatory to the opening of the service (legislation, regulations, planning); as well as a dialogue with pedagogically trained educational professionals, that are already engaged in early childhood education, concerning activities in which University trainees are involved. A theoretical/practical education has been developed concerning aspects that the trainee, in reality, seldom or only on an executive level confronts, since he/she more often uses, in real traineeships, theoretical and physical materials that are already fitted by structured educators. Therefore, the simulated traineeship experience has been shaped as a sort of incubator for developing a solid connection between science, practice and legislation. In this paper the strong and the weak points of the simulated traineeship are discussed, as well as further opportunities of development, in order to save some positive aspects and include them in the future pre-service training for educators.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Simulated traineeship, Pre-service training, Early child education and care, Narrative research.*

### Introduction

COVID-19's health emergency has imposed several challenges to the education system. Avoiding the mere transposition of the traditional didactics into a web-based learning has been the main objective both of schools and universities. In Italy, as the wide participation in the session E.4.1<sup>1</sup> of Scuola Democratica's Second International Conference demonstrated, university departments of education paid close attention to the quality of the traineeship, in order to allow students to experience

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<sup>1</sup> The title of that session is *Training Educational Professionals During the Pandemic: Impact, Learning, Strategies and New Didactic Challenges Faced by The University Traineeship.*

the practical learning and, consequently, to preserve the connection between the theoretical knowledge and the practical skills that characterize the educator's professionalism.

Therefore, several alternatives to the traditional traineeship have been designed, starting from the Virtual Internship (Agrati, Vinci, 2021) and Virtual Labs (Alioon, Delialio lu, 2019) where trainers mostly blend together webinars, and the practices of the Simulated Learning Environment (Bosman, 2002; Kaufman, Sauve, 2010; Dalla Rosa, Vianello, 2015; Pensieri, Alloni, 2019; Landon-Hays *et al.*, 2020), that are already steady in sundry field of the professional training, primarily in preservice medical training (Martins *et al.*, 2012; Hau *et al.*, 2020).

In the University of Cagliari, the simulated traineeship experience involved second and third year-students of the Sciences of Education Course in the field of the Early Child Education and Care (ECEC) during the first COVID-19 lockdown.

It has been inspired by the 'Simulated Educational Enterprise' (Moise *et al.*, 2014), that is a training model that was successful in high schools of business in the first years of 2000 and that came again to the fore in the context of School-Work Alternation (Consolini, 2012; Greco, 2018). In the case that is going to be introduced, the training space has been set up like a preparatory environment where tutees could experiment the phases that precede the opening of the educational service and face personally the responsibility of being prepared for that. Preliminary aspects included were the study and reflection upon national and regional legislation, internal regulations, and standard for the planning; then the dialogue with pedagogically trained educational professionals (that are already engaged in early childhood education) was fostered. Furthermore, tutees were asked to design some activities they could have provided if they had been engaged in a real service, including the manufacture of the related educational tools.

## **1. General objectives and formative objectives**

Principally, this simulated traineeship tried to meet students' difficulties in starting or completing their traineeship during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, this was the opportunity to correct some problems that arise during the traditional traineeship<sup>2</sup> such as:

- The students' need of deepening and comprehension about several theoretical and practical aspects that trainees, during the traditional traineeship, seldom confront with or that they play on an executive level;

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<sup>2</sup> Qualitative data about the traineeship are collected at the end of every traineeship by the faculty's traineeship board, through questionnaires and final reports filled/written by both students and host tutors.

- Student's poor awareness about the foundation of theoretical and physical materials that, in the real traineeship, are already fitted by structured educators;
- The sometimes lacking close and continuous connection between the university's tutorship and the trainees.

Despite of the emergency situation, the main educational objectives were preserved. They can be classified in six categories:

1. Knowledge about ECEC legislation;
2. Knowledge about ECEC's services organization (professional roles, spaces, daily activities);
3. Analytical and reflective skills concerning education needs of ECEC beneficiaries;
4. Analytical and assessment skills about internal regulations and education plans;
5. Educational design skills and implementation skills;
6. Social skills.

## **2. Organisation, tutor inputs, educational methods and trainees outputs**

The first concern was the organisation of the simulated traineeship, in order to ensure to the tutees the same level of engagement and the same ratio between the starting possibilities and the educational effects then a real traineeship. Moreover, the optimal balance among tutees' engagements and between tutor's and tutees engagement were strongly wanted and pursued. Indeed, one of the main risks was overburdening students with all the difficulties and responsibilities of being trainees in the pandemic emergency, and, consequently, making them perceive a sort of unfairness. In fact, the perception of justice, among other factors, can contribute to carry out deviant workplace behaviours (Syaebani, Sobri, 2013).

As the model of the Simulated Enterprise require (Costea, 2010), the climate of this traineeship was similar then in the reality, as well as the organization was similar then smart working one (working hours, discipline, working situations, tasks development).

Tutors planned two meetings per week: one at the beginning of the week, in order to provide students with the preparatory instruction about the task, and one at the end of the week, in order to foster the dialogue, the exchange of ideas and results, and to encourage students' assumption of responsibility.

Tutors also created a chat group on an instant messaging application and invited tutees to participate in the daily interactions, during which instant support was given from 9am to 5pm, each week from Monday till Friday.

Furthermore, other inputs, as the teaching materials (Lei, 2018), the individual support for the comprehension of the difficult topics and tasks, the coordination of the working groups, the mentoring moments (Colvin,

2015), and the using video-tutorials (Bonaiuti, 2010), strengthened the general perception of being a work team in training.

Methodologically, the single activities that composed this simulated traineeship were inspired by:

- Mastery Learning<sup>3</sup> (Bloom, 1973);
- Jig Saw<sup>4</sup> (Aronson, 1978);
- Flipped classroom<sup>5</sup> (Bergmann, 2014);
- Analogy and Analogical Reasoning method<sup>6</sup> (Gentner, Smith, 2012);
- Learning by doing<sup>7</sup> (Dewey, 1986; Smart, Csapo, 2007);
- Reflective workshops<sup>8</sup> (Peters, 1991; Ruch, 2002; Baldacci, 2005);
- E-mentoring<sup>9</sup> (Ensher, Murphy, 2007);
- Project-based learning<sup>10</sup> (Kilpatrick, 1918);

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<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the preparatory activities, tutees were asked to read the articles about the first steps of child development and the growth indicator, that are published on Bambino Gesù hospital's website. Then, they had to integrate the information with peer reviewed articles they found in selected search engines and annotate the most important aspects. Finally tutors invited them to link the information they found with the Developmental Psychology theories they studied during their university career.

<sup>4</sup> During the first week trainees had to download to their devices the documents concerning the whole set of rules about ECES (national and local legislation/regulations) that tutors uploaded on the Moodle page of the course. Students were divided into groups, each of which had to study an assigned part of the documents according and make a presentation to share with the other groups.

<sup>5</sup> In the second week, after a brief presentation of what a Treasure Basket by Elinor Goldschmied is, including some benefits for baby's development, like fine motor skill, hand-eye coordination, foundation for conceptual learning and independent play (Hughes, 2015), tutor asked tutees to search for the foundation theory of this tool and the criteria for including the objects in the treasure basket. Then tutees had to realise their own Treasure Basket at home and, finally, make a deep presentation of their tools, giving the scientific justification of every choice, like they were training the colleagues.

<sup>6</sup> In the web, trainee had to search for an internal regulation document and an education program of a Sardinian ECEC service. Then, they had to convert those documents into a Microsoft word document and underline with different colours what of each document was referred to the national and/or regional legislation, what was referred to the knowledge about the child development and needs and what was referred to the internal methodological peculiarities. Finally, each tutee was asked to write a short review of those documents, in order to facilitate the discussion with the colleagues.

<sup>7</sup> Among the other practical workshops, in Tactile Path workshop tutees were asked to build their own Tactile (or sensorial) Path, a tool for sensory and motor development (Cooke, 1999), using natural materials like grass, stones, leaves, water, sand, gravel. In addition, they were invited to make a Plant Box (for +24 months aged children), sowing the seeds, loosening the roots, planting the basil, the parsley, and other aromatic plants.

<sup>8</sup> At the end of each activity, collective reflection where encouraged. The main topic of the reflective workshops was the link between theory and practice; the ethical issues of the education in ECEC services; the adequacy of the ECEC's legislation; the consistency between the business plan and the educational project of ECEC services.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the constant support, students had the opportunity to meet video-conference application several experts who work in the field of ECEC's services. That was important for promoting the mirroring, exchanging of narratives, and reducing some student's fears regarding issues that are related to the work practice.

<sup>10</sup> During the week called 'Music week', inspired to the Music Learning Theory (Gordon, 2003), trainee designed some activities they could propose to the children. Therefore,

- Metacognitive workshops<sup>11</sup> (Arredondo and Rucinski, 1994);
- Video observation and annotation<sup>12</sup> (Sørenssen *et al.*, 2019).

The whole organization, as well as the methodological frame we have just introduced, aimed to make evolve the concept of 'simulated experience' that is the foundation of common simulated training into 'experience of simulation', that means creating a real experience starting from a condition of experience deprivation, namely deeply embracing the foundation of the active learning in the professional training field, despite of the pandemic, and experiencing a tangible example of resilience as a guiding attitude for the future working and social life (Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, 2002).

Full-time trainees completed their traineeship in a month, while part-time trainees did that in forty-five days. At the end of the training they wrote a final report, where they described their individual training narratives related to the simulated traineeship. Further research will analyse with a comparative approach the data collected through these reports and the reports written after the face-to-face traineeships.

### 3. Qualitative analysis of the simulated traineeship

The strong points of the realized experience have concerned the chance provided to the educators to-be, to look at their professional role in its foundations: deepening the theoretical perspective from which it descends; taking part in the planning of the simulated activities, by shaping the specific materials for these (an important manual construction that leads to the understanding of the object's pedagogical meaning); examining the normative perspectives and offered possibilities; developing an entrepreneurial look on their activity.

The weak points lay intrinsically in its status of simulation:

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they were asked to make a project work, in accordance with Parmigiani and Traverso guidelines (2011). They had three options to develop:

1. Listening education. Through the association between the sounds and the images of the producing object/subject, educator furthers fine listening skills and trains children in the recognition and the discrimination of the sounds.
2. Playing music with children using self-made drums. Educators make the drums shown in a tutorial and set up an educational activity concerning the concepts of sound, rhythm and tempo.
3. Singing meta-music songs (songs that make reflect about music). Educator chooses a song whose lyrics and melodies help children in understanding the concepts of musical notes, volume, intensity. Educator can do some exercise to warm up the voices with children.

<sup>11</sup> Trainees were involved constantly in the reflection about their own learning processes. At the end of each activity tutors shared with tutees the knowledge of the methods they applied, in order to provide to them the skills they can use as trainers.

<sup>12</sup> During the week called 'Week of the Nature', inspired to Bortolotti's principles of Outdoor Education (Bortolotti *et al.*, 2020) trainees observed the video recorded during the project *Educational Garden*, powered by Municipality of Florence, and annotated the most important aspects (educators' inputs, children outputs).

1. the impossibility of a real interaction with young children and their families and with colleagues represents an objective limitation in obtaining an approach's validation.
2. the limited real work circumstances hinder the 'reflective professional' in developing the implicit and internalized knowledges (Palmieri *et al.*, 2009; Mortari, 2012) that are part of their education.

## Conclusions

Since it is often pointed out that University traineeships are not embedded in a comprehensive perspective of the professional role of educator – whereas this perspective would entail the educator effectiveness, in terms of an authentic professional and general education (Oggionni, Palmieri, 2019; Cornacchia, 2020) – it is possible to suppose that the described simulated traineeship approach could be valued as a preparatory step to the real traineeship, on the model of the teaching indirect traineeship (Bolognesi, D'Ascenzo, 2018).

Possible threats that can affect the achievement of this development are the shortage of university tutoring staff, and the difficulties in managing the whole process, from the indirect traineeship to the real traineeship.

Nevertheless, a Peer-tutored traineeship, in accordance with peer tutoring theories (Gordon, 2005) can be designed. This would mean engaging master's degrees students, which are studying to be pedagogists, that are coordinators of educational services, in the Bachelor's Degree traineeship organisation, management, implementation and assessment.

As Watson points out (Watson, 2003), the University as institution, needs a continuous reworking of its specific and general goals, towards two different directions: its connection with other social institutions, in particular in the pedagogical field, a tight alliance with other educational services and settings; its connection with the students' vocations, ambitions and perspectives, that may change for cultural and historical reasons in the course of time. Both objectives must be steadily interconnected and balanced. The simulated traineeship experience that has been presented in this text could have been a way to maintain this fundamental task over the difficult time of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and to show a renovated approach to face it in the future.

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