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The Italian evaluation reform tries to change teaching methods: can professional development help?

Mixed-Methods, case studies research on teachers' professional development connected to Italian national reform on primary school evaluation methodology

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Introduction

This research takes the lead from the change in Italian primary school evaluation system, initiated during the 2020-21 school year (the reform decree OM172, from here on). The system changed from a 0-10 grade scale to a criterion-based evaluation, with 4 levels based on 4 dimensions: autonomy, use of resources, known and unknown context and continuity. Widely unprepared schools requested PD modules to universities. This created the condition for a mixed-methods and case study research aiming at investigating two main areas: on one hand how teacher's habitus and preconceived ideas of teaching and learning shape their idea of evaluation, self-efficacy, and their willingness to welcome change; on the other hand, what type of PD, institutional culture and community of practice can support systemic change (Barnes in Russel & Mumby (eds.), 1992).

RQ1: What, if any, are the elements of continuity between ideas of teaching and learning, culture of assessment, sense of self-efficacy, way of coping with the changes imposed by OM172? How do these aspects influence professional development (PD) results?

Mixed-Methods --> Survey with open and closed questions

Sample:

132 individual teachers in 4 school institutions (Es1, Es2, Es3, Es4)

The qualitative questions (6 open questions on daily teaching practices and routines) were analyzed to sketch teachers' implicit ideas of teaching and learning, habitus, pedagogical format.
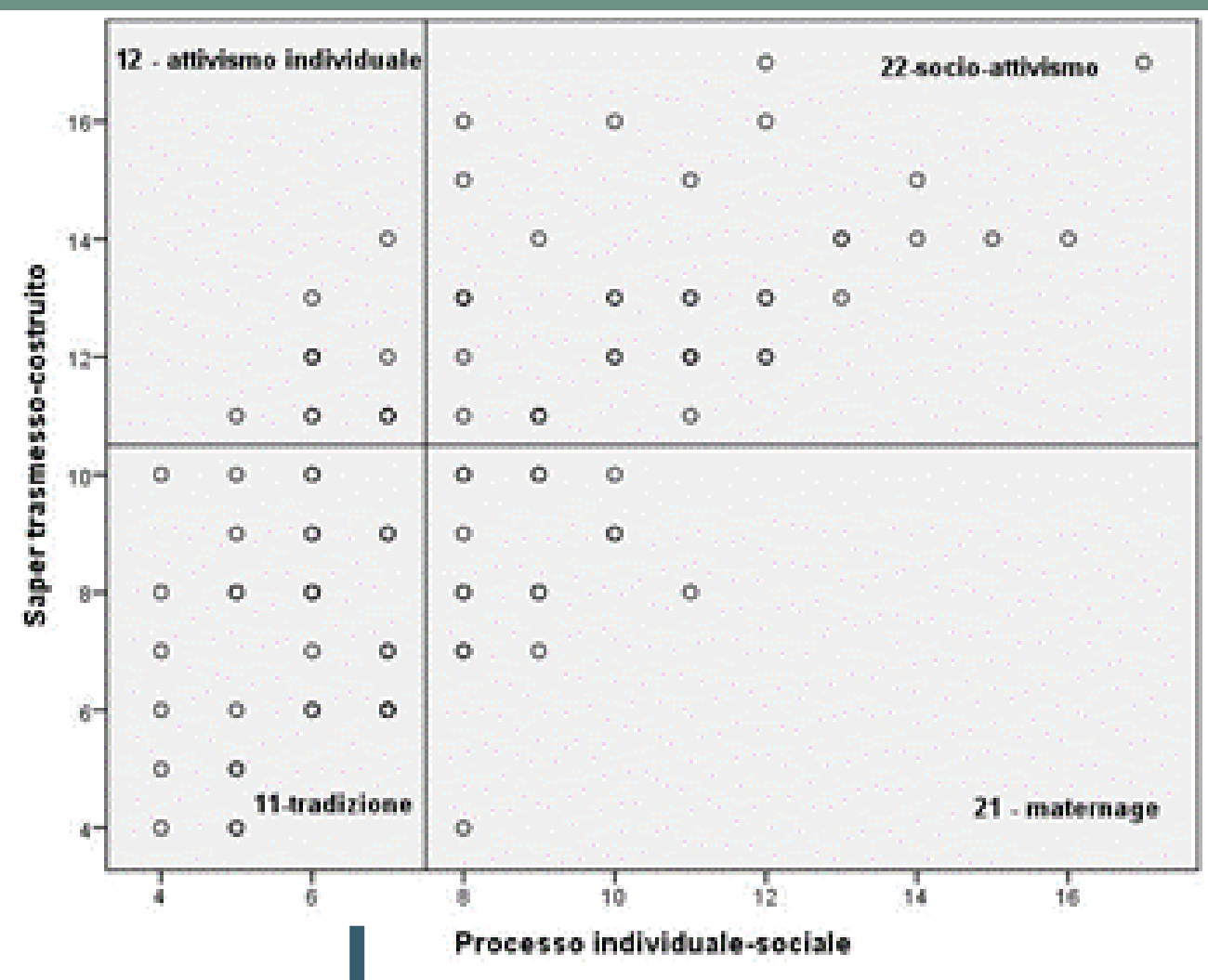
y axis "knowledge: transmission to self-construction"

x axis "learning: : individual to social process"

	11- learning as individual endeavor based on knowledge transmission	22- learning as a collective and social constructions
In service experience	Fewer years	More years
Role of family, luck and talent	Factors to be considered	Less or no importance
Role of assessment	helping teachers direct their action	Providing broad guidelines to students
Assessment measurement	high level of confusion	deeper understanding of educational measurement
Assessment and teaching methodologies (before OM172)	Written tests, feedback, oral tests	Analysis of discussions, students' self-evaluation, oral testing, real life projects; working in groups
Assessment and teaching methodologies (after OM172)	Oral explanation, written tests	Students' self-evaluation, real life projects, working in groups, analysis of discussions; intensify use of open-ended questions, clarify learning objectives, observation of learning process
Self-evaluated abilities	Clarifying learning objectives	Posing stimulating questions and issues, re-modeling teaching methodologies based on evidence and using different assessment strategies

RQ1: The implicit ideas of teaching and learning have an effect on the way teachers see the role of factors external to school in education; understand assessment; use assessment and teaching methodologies; react to changes. Through a survey it is possible to identify teachers' trend profiles and thus design more effective PD modules.

RQ2: OM172 wants to produce substantial and lasting changes in assessment and thus in teaching methodologies: which characteristics of training can effectively support these processes?

Qualitative: case studies --> Observtions during PD and 5FG

Sample

PD in 2 schools Es1 and Es2 (2 focus group in Es1 and 3 in Es2)

Similaritiess total length; number of meetings and hours; background ideas on the decree and the desirable learning outcomes of a training on the topic, mix of oral explanation and hands-on activities

Differences

	Es1	Es2
Number of trainers	1	2
Teachers involved	Whole staff	30 teachers with a conscious plan involving a cascade model and creation of a PD community
Presentation of theories	Sketching different scenarios based on teaching material used in other schools, letting the themes emerge from experience	theoretical elements broken down in subsequential steps, understanding of previous step necessary to move forward
School practices and documentation	standardized course adjusted based on the support group ideas	PD designed with the school leadership and based on the school practices and documentation tools
Role of learners	No discussion during the online plenaries (due to number of participants), limited trainer's involvement in the workshops	direct dialogue with trainers (thanks too group size), presentation of contents through an inquiry model to develop answers together
Others		feedback on home and workshop assignments, use of visual metaphors and Lesson Study

Which words would you use to characterize OM172 and the changes introduced in schools?

Sub-coding	Example of coded segments	Es2 – A	Es2 – B	Es2 - C	Es1 - A	Es1 - B	Total
Positive	Systemic change; progress; restart	8	9	2	2	1	22
		36%	41%	9%	9%	5%	31%
Negative	False changes; formal change; incoherent; improvised	0	0	0	15	13	28
		0%	0%	0%	54%	46%	40%
Neutral	Descriptive judgment; known un-known; back to the past	3	6	9	2	0	20
		15%	30%	45%	10%	0%	29%
	TOTAL	16%	21%	16%	27%	20%	100%

For futher information

	Es1B	Es1A	Es2C	Es2B	Es2A	Tot
References to PD out of specific questions	0	5	2	**13**	**9**	29
Acquired understandings on the reform thanks to the PD	0	2	1	**3**	**12**	18
Positive notes on PD	1	3	**5**	**4**	**10**	23
Negative notes on PD	**5**	**8**	2	1	1	17
Elements of PD effectiveness	1	2	**9**	**4**	**4**	20
Need of multiple perspectives during PD	7	2	0	1	4	14
Confusion and uncertainty	**4**	**5**	1	1	1	12
Transformative uncertainty	0	2	**2**	**3**	**5**	12

RQ2: Elements of effectiveness for PD: reflection and activation of participants; materials created for the specific school environment; clear and consequential presentation of theoretical framework; provision of specific and circumstantial feedbacks; sharing common practices (Lesson Study). These elements determine: deeper understanding of OM172 and its implication, positive attitude toward change; deeper awareness of connections between teaching, learning and assessment; creation of a community of practice within the school providing support for individual teachers' PD; feasibility of cascade model under specific condition, e.g. creation of a community of practice and PD sessions common to the entire group.