



Building Pathways to Primary Teachers Training: the Italian Model, the Florentine Experience, and the International Context

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Abstract. The article briefly presents the Italian model of teacher education for preschool and primary school teachers, with particular reference to the five-year single-cycle Master's degree in Primary Teacher Education. The first paragraph outlines some of the key features and specific characteristics that define the implementation of the national model at the University of Florence. The second part of the contribution presents the ongoing experimental initiatives within the internationalization processes of the degree program, which represent one of the distinctive aspects that make the Florentine experience rather unique within the Italian context.

Keywords: Primary school, Teacher training, Education, Internationalization, University of Florence.

1 Leadership as a Key Factor in the Shaping of Primary Teacher Training: the Florentine Experience

In this contribution we are presenting the Master's Degree in Primary Teacher Education, with a particular focus on the program offered by the University of Florence. This is a five-year single-cycle degree, designed to prepare future teachers for early childhood and primary education. Like all programs in this class, it is regulated by Ministerial Decree, which defines the national framework for initial teacher training in Italy [13]. At the University of Florence, this framework is implemented with particular attention to educational quality and innovation [2]. The program is directly qualifying, meaning that graduates are immediately certified to teach in both preschool and primary school. Access to the course is limited and regulated through a national entrance exam. At Florence, this selection process is highly competitive, reflecting the strong demand for the program and the university's reputation in the field of education. Every year, seven or eight hundreds candidates are entering in this competition. The University of Florence places strong emphasis on connecting theory with practice from the early stages of the program, working closely with a wide network of schools across the Tus-

cany region [17]. In fact, a central element in teacher's training program is the compulsory internship, which includes both direct and indirect activities. Overall, the regulatory framework is enriched locally by the florentine university's long-standing tradition in teacher education and its strong ties with the regional school system [6].

Let's have a brief look at the academic organization of the program, focusing on how it is structured at the University of Florence. The degree lasts five years and includes 300 ECTS credits. At Florence, the curriculum is carefully designed to provide a solid interdisciplinary foundation [16]. Students take courses in pedagogy, psychology, and didactics, combined with subject-specific content such as Italian language, mathematics, sciences, and humanistic disciplines. One distinctive feature of the University of Florence is its strong integration of laboratory activities. These workshops are highly interactive and often linked to real teaching scenarios, allowing students to experiment with didactic strategies, methodologies and tools they will later use in classrooms as professional teachers. The internship is the key component of the training program and it begins in the second year. At the University of Florence, it is organized progressively year after year and it is supported by a structured system of supervision. Students are placed in accredited schools throughout the region, benefiting from the university's extensive network of partner institutions. Other two important aspects are the attention to inclusive education and emphasis on innovative teaching methods, which are embedded across courses and labs. The program concludes with a final thesis that has a qualifying value. At the University of Florence, students are encouraged to connect their thesis work with their internship experience, creating a strong link between research and practice [14]. This integrated structure ensures that graduates are well-prepared for the complexity of real educational contexts.

Now let's consider the professional profile of graduates, with a focus on the specific approach of the University of Florence. As already pointed out, graduates are qualified to teach in preschool and primary school, but their professional role is certainly much broader. At Florence, particular emphasis is placed on developing reflective and critical educators, capable of adapting their teaching to diverse classroom situations [16]. Graduates will thus acquire strong competencies in instructional design, classroom management, and student assessment. In addition, the University of Florence highlights the importance of inclusion, preparing future teachers to work effectively with students with special educational needs. A distinctive element of the Florence program is its focus on the relationship between theory and practice. Through continuous interaction between coursework, labs, and internship, students learn to critically reflect on their teaching experiences [12]. Communication and relational skills are also central. The program trains teachers to collaborate with families, colleagues, and the wider community, recognizing the social dimension of education. Furthermore, the University of Florence promotes awareness of cultural diversity and encourages innovative and student-centered teaching approaches. In this way, graduates are not only qualified teachers, but also educational professionals who will contribute actively to school development and improvement [11].

Finally, let's look at the organizational structure of the program at the University of Florence. The course is coordinated by a Program Coordinator, who ensures the overall

quality and coherence of the degree. At Florence, this role is supported by a well-structured governance system. The Degree Program Board includes faculty members and student representatives, allowing for shared decision-making and continuous improvement of the program. There are also dedicated committees, such as the teaching committee, the internship committee and the Assessment and Quality assurance committee. At the University of Florence, particular importance is given to the organization and monitoring of internships, given their central role in teacher training. A key strength of the program is the tutoring system. Each student is supported by both university tutors and school tutors, who guide him or her throughout his/her academic and professional development. The University of Florence also maintains strong partnerships with local schools and regional education authorities across Tuscany. These collaborations are essential for ensuring high-quality internship experiences and alignment with the needs of the education system, and also thanks to this network of relationships, the employment rate one year after graduation is around 95% [1].

2 Leadership as a Collaborative Effort for the Construction of Experimental Educational Internship Activities

The Degree Program in Primary Teacher Education has a truly complex structure. Both in the organization of lessons and in the internship, students must develop important and interconnected professional and transversal skills. This is because the professional role of the teacher today is called upon to have a highly proactive profile. Teachers must be attentive to the changing characteristics of today's schools: socially, linguistically, culturally, and pedagogically. The teacher is no longer a simple transmitter of knowledge, but a coordinator of the educational process who works within an extended educational community: the school, local institutions, social agencies, the family. In short, today's teacher should possess a mix of skills (personal attention, assessment, teaching, mediation skills, etc.) and for this reason, within an increasingly multicultural society and community, this professionalism should be built through international comparative processes.

Students in the Primary Teacher Education degree program can carry out many activities at other universities and educational institutions in Europe and in countries outside the European Union. The international mobility program is intense [8]: Erasmus+ Program to study in other European University; bilateral agreements with foreign universities (exchanges outside the EU); teaching or observation activities in international schools; educational projects in multicultural contexts; summer schools and international courses; workshops on intercultural teaching, inclusion, and global education; participation in European projects (e.g., eTwinning [5]); group work with students from other countries (e.g., COIL); international conferences, seminars, and webinars; workshops on intercultural and inclusive education [9].

As we can see, there are many opportunities for students, but with one (unfortunately) important exception. The Primary Teacher Education degree program cannot undertake internships abroad. This is established by the law Ministerial Decree DM 249/2010. This limitation is dictated by the need to familiarize prospective teachers

with the Italian school system, but it ignores the need for ongoing dialogue with international school systems. This is increasingly necessary to foster growth and progress in the teaching profession and in teaching, two central processes for the education of new democratic citizens. Growth and change are grounded in dialogue, and a school closed to dialogue with other international experiences, in my opinion, continues to be a school with limited development prospects [7].

The teaching profession cannot be viewed as a path with rigid and immutable boundaries: a critical and comparative approach makes teachers' educational and teaching approaches fruitful and proactive [15]. Teachers should teach young people, above all, how to live well, offering an increasingly open cultural and social perspective, open to exchange and dialogue. For these reasons, the FORLILPSI Department of the University of Florence has developed an experiment linked to professional internships. University of Florence has been implementing a pilot program for years in agreement with ministerial offices, the only one in Italy, also linked to the Erasmus Plus program [4].

The project is structured as follows: 2 Month Experimental Curricular Internship in the Erasmus Program (Brussels active since 2012; Vic since 2016). It is intended for the curricular internship of the 4th year (T3) of the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences at the European School Brussels II in Belgium and the Escola Andersen in Vic in Spain. The European School of Brussels offers students the opportunity to practice multiple languages, experience a common European curriculum, promotes European citizenship and offers highly interdisciplinary activities. The Catalan school in Vic is characterized by an inclusive model, educates in democratic values, organizes innovative and experimental teaching, promotes cooperative learning, experiments with multilingualism, involves families in the educational organization and has a history linked to anti-dogmatic and libertarian cultural movements.

Below are the 4 essential points that represent the institutional part of the project:

- The internship will be conducted in agreement with the host organizations and will last two months abroad
- The indirect internship for project preparation and documentation processing will take place regularly at the Degree Program.
- The internships will be part of the Erasmus+ traineeship mobility programme.
- Knowledge of languages is subject to evaluation by the Commission and is considered an essential requirement for participation in the selection process.

The opportunity to develop and implement this experiment arose thanks to the collaboration between various educational institutions, local organizations, and the University of Florence staff. This is already a prime example of collaborative and inclusive leadership. Leadership plays a central role in the design and implementation of this experimental internship, as it serves as a guiding force capable of orienting complex processes, integrating theory and practice, and enhancing the human resources involved. This initiative would not have been possible without a genuine commitment from all the leadership teams to offer a quality professional experience to Florence's students. It guides, supports, and enhances the entire process, contributing to the development of competent, reflective future teachers capable of positively impacting educational contexts. These are the other entities and institutions involved: 1) the Regional School Office, on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Merit; 2) preschools and

primary schools in Spain and Belgium; 3) the head of the university tutoring group and the tutor in charge of the Erasmus program; 4) the Internationalization Office of the Faculty of Humanities and Education and the Erasmus Delegate.

Over the years, this experiment has attracted great interest from students, being an important opportunity to fully experience the educational profession according to the principle of international comparison. The ability to build cooperative networks between managers, teachers, students, and the educational community fosters a climate of shared participation, professional exchange, and openness to change. Confirmation that this collaboration has worked well comes from the students themselves, who have shared their experiences positively and in many different ways: their degree theses, participation in other Erasmus Plus-related experiences, and the decision to work abroad, sometimes at one of the pilot schools. These students often participated in orientation days organized by the school's Erasmus Delegate to encourage other students to participate in this pilot and to encourage them to have an international experience. Therefore, to conclude this brief overview of a project that would require more space to fully explain its argument, truly proactive leadership in schools must be open to the ideas of all participants, especially students: listening to their requests, addressing their needs, and helping them grow as more autonomous, more aware, and more democratic individuals and professionals. Proactive leadership has the task of improving learning, promoting an ever-evolving vision of school, and encouraging relationships between students and teachers based on care and inclusion. It also has the task of supporting educational innovation (looking not only at new technologies, but also at the recovery of a rich and complex language, full of emotional and human meaning). With this pilot program designed and dedicated to future teachers, the Degree Program in Primary Teacher Education in Florence has intentionally moved in this direction, seeking to develop and improve the democratic quality of education.

3 Conclusions

The experience of the University of Florence shows how initial teacher education can become a dynamic space in which national regulations, local educational traditions, and international perspectives are brought into productive dialogue. The Italian model of Primary Teacher Education, with its five-year single-cycle structure and strong emphasis on internships, provides a solid framework for preparing future preschool and primary school teachers. Within this framework, the Florentine experience stands out for its capacity to integrate academic knowledge, laboratory activities, school-based practice, inclusive education, and reflective professional development.

A central element emerging from this contribution is the importance of leadership as a collaborative and transformative process. The organization of teacher training cannot rely only on formal structures or administrative coordination; rather, it requires shared responsibility among universities, schools, tutors, students, local institutions, and international partners. In this sense, the Florentine model demonstrates that educational

leadership is most effective when it creates networks, supports participation, and encourages innovation while remaining attentive to the real needs of future teachers and educational communities.

The experimental international internship project represents a particularly significant example of this approach. Although Italian legislation limits the possibility of carrying out ordinary curricular internships abroad, the University of Florence has developed an innovative pathway that allows students to engage with European educational contexts through carefully structured mobility experiences. The cases of Brussels and Vic show that international comparison can enrich professional training by exposing future teachers to multilingual environments, inclusive practices, democratic values, cooperative learning, and different models of school organization.

This experience also confirms that the professional identity of teachers is built not only through the acquisition of disciplinary and didactic knowledge, but also through reflection, dialogue, cultural openness, and direct engagement with diverse educational realities. Future teachers need opportunities to observe, compare, question, and reinterpret their own practices in light of broader European and international perspectives. Such experiences contribute to the development of more autonomous, critical, inclusive, and democratic educational professionals.

In conclusion, the Florentine experience suggests that teacher education should be understood as a pathway of continuous construction, where theory and practice, local roots and international openness, institutional responsibility and student agency are closely connected. The pilot program described in this paper points toward a model of teacher training capable of responding to the complexity of contemporary schools and societies. By promoting collaborative leadership, reflective practice, and international dialogue, the Degree Program in Primary Teacher Education at the University of Florence contributes to the preparation of teachers who are not only professionally competent, but also capable of fostering more inclusive, participatory, and democratic forms of education.

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