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Colmare le distanze: Migliorare la formazione degli insegnanti attraverso le soft skill in Italia e Finlandia

Bridging Borders: Enhancing Teacher Education through Soft Skills in Italy and Finland

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ABSTRACT.
According to the article, the importance of soft skills in teacher education is central to Italian and Finnish systems. It underscores that there is a need for special educational programs to prepare the workforce. The present study used BIP (Business-Focused Inventory of Personality) to measure communication, cooperation, empathy, and adaptability competencies based on profiles of 160 secondary school teachers—80 from Rome and 80 from Turku. The results indicated that Finnish teachers score higher on assertiveness and team effort compared to Italian teachers, who score better on assertiveness and interpersonal engagement with sensitivity. These insights are important implications for imbibing soft skills training within the curricula meant for the education of teachers to help in building inclusive learning environments. Empowering teachers with basic interpersonal competencies, the study argues for changing the paradigm of pre-service teacher training so that students become more motivated while learning and raise their educational level to narrow the gap between education and the world of work.

ABSTRACT
Il documento dimostra la centralità delle “soft skills” per la formazione dei docenti nei sistemi italiani e finlandesi. Lo studio spiega come sia necessario predisporre specifici corsi di specializzazione mirati alla professionalità dei docenti. Nel presente studio è stato utilizzato il BIP (Business-Focused Inventory of Personality) al fine di misurare le competenze di cooperazione, comunicative, emotive e di flessibilità, basandosi sui profili di 160 docenti di scuola secondaria, 80 di Roma e 80 di Turku. I primi risultati indicano che gli insegnanti finlandesi ottengono punteggi più alti per quanto riguarda l'assertività e il lavoro di squadra rispetto agli insegnanti italiani, che invece ottengono punteggi migliori per quanto concerne l'assertività e l'impegno interpersonale caratterizzato da sensibilità. Questi risultati rappresentano importanti implicazioni per l' integrazione della formazione sulle soft skills all'interno dei curricula destinati alla formazione degli insegnanti, al fine di agevolare la realizzazione di ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi. Lo studio sostiene la necessità di cambiare il modello di formazione degli insegnanti pre-servizio in modo che gli studenti siano più orientati all'apprendimento e migliorino il loro livello di istruzione per ridurre il divario tra l' università e il mondo del lavoro.

PAROLE CHIAVE / KEYWORDS
Competenze trasversali; Formazione degli insegnanti; Pratiche pedagogiche; Equità educativa, Apprendimento collaborativo

Soft Skills, Teacher Education, Pedagogical Practices, Educational Equity, Collaborative Learning

INTRODUCTION

The trend is with the weighting of the learning experience by maintaining the formative value but enriching it with practical elements relating to the lives of learners in preparation for emerging leadership positions in the world of work (CEDEFOP, 2015). The issue remains, despite the ever-increasing numbers of graduates in developed countries, notably within the European Union: a large proportion of the youth remain inaccessible because of a mismatch between their education or training and employer-required skills (World Economic Forum, 2018). The OECD has been underlining this paradox, primarily through programs like the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and the Program for International Student Assessment, which measures the preparedness of students for the labour market. Results continuously show that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds perform poorly, even in industrialized nations (OECD, 2018). Consequently, there has been a worldwide upsurge in the discourse of soft skills, "the interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies essential for success in the workplace"— which impels educators to rethink the infusion of these skills in curricula (Ngang et al., 2015).
The rapid social changes of the past decade have widened the gap between educational institutions and the labour market, intensifying the uncertainty faced by students entering the workforce for the first time. CEDEFOP (2015) reports indicate that 44% of European workers possess skill levels below those necessary for total productivity, with 21% lacking the minimum skills required to begin their first employment experience.
In this context, generative pedagogy, as articulated by Mannese (2016, 2022), provides a valuable framework for addressing the complexities of contemporary labour markets. This pedagogical approach emphasizes the cultivation of individual potential and the incorporation of soft skills into teacher training programs to promote inclusive and adaptive educational practices. This convergence of skills has greatly increased employment opportunities in occupations that require high levels of both hard and soft skills because, as described by the OECD (2017), competence is defined as "the successful mobilization of knowledge, cognitive and practical skills to complex demands in a particular context—such mobilization also includes social and behavioural components (including attitudes and motivation)" (OECD, 2017).
At the European level, adopting the Lisbon Agenda has emphasised the critical importance of acquiring key competencies for the well-being of citizens, social cohesion, and economic competitiveness in a globalised world. These competencies are essential for young people to navigate the complexities of career design and life planning, as articulated by researchers like Savickas (2014) and Guichard (2010).
Another paper outlining the findings of research conducted by Pearson with Nesta and The Oxford Martin School under the title The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030, was published in the year 2018. "The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030 (2018)," highlights how important interpersonal and higher-order cognitive skills that most directly include originality and active learning are to good working practice. This shows a need for strategies to be developed by educators, firms, and policymakers that will work to nurture these skills in the generations to come (Pearson, 2018).

THE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS IN EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENSES OF GENERATIVE PEDAGOGY

Generative pedagogy is one important framework that would help to transform higher education through integrating soft skills into the curricula. According to Mannese (2016, 2022), this pedagogy works for the activation of personal agency and the development of interpersonally oriented competencies necessary to become responsive to the complexities of the modern labour market. It has been argued that generative pedagogy tends to redefine educational practices, shifting the focus away from the transmission of knowledge traditionally accorded to meet the fast-evolving needs of the workplace (Ngang et al., 2015).

Transformative pedagogy in higher education, most of all when seen from the perspectives of generative pedagogy, emphasizes the integration between training and work. As properly underlined by Mannese (2019; 2021), these categories need to be rethought within the scope of generative pedagogy. Arising from the well-founded scientific tradition of the Observatory on Training Processes and of the territorial analyses developed within the University of Salerno, which underpins the epistemology of this discussion.

The activities of this Observatory materialize in programs that foster "generativity" as a new way of knowing, considering the totality of human potential and its manifold aspects (Mannese, 2019). The paradigm of "Pedagogy as a Science of Boundaries," developed by Mannese (2016; 2018; 2019), points the orientation of work to the elaboration of a dynamical pedagogical framework. This pedagogical framework combines guidance processes into a gens (.Proulx, 2008).

Generative pedagogical approaches, which emphasize active participation and cooperation, have proven very effective in developing these skills (Contini et al., 2020). These approaches often assure the growth of not only cognizant thinking but also emotional and social development that will later create a wholesome education experience. As presented in the studies of Goldstein and Freeman (2013) and Nilssen (2010), educators' principles relate to their reaction to student needs and, thus, emphasize that teachers should also embody the values of soft skills to create supportive learning environments.

Based on the available information, certain factors seem to play a crucial role in this situation, as the infusion of soft skills supports not only the single educator but the excellence of teaching practice in general (Ricciardi, 2021, 2022). By developing a collaborative and reflective culture, generative pedagogy enables universities to be more responsive to labour market requirements and thus better align outcomes with employer expectations.

This approach suggests that the generative teaching method brings the side of experience acting as a furthering factor in the transformation of educational, formative and career orientation processes. "Limits", "knowledge" and "transformation of lived experience into metaphor" will construct the basic underpinnings of generative thinking. This will allow learners to set forth appropriate professional paths through talent discovery. The development of "generative learning" environments takes into account the transformative value of experiences whether within or outside formal educational settings. This responsibility constitutes the embracement of "care of the whole" in such an attainment-driven design of experiential pathways created to transcend initial limitations and empower people to make life choices in line with their will. Transformative elements in educational, self-formative and career-oriented processes are brought into being by experience under generative pedagogy. Besides experience, "freedom" comes into the picture as a critical aspect. This aspect of freedom translates into "opportunity" for individuals to base their choices on the premise that their experiential background is dynamic and serves as a resource for new learning and self-development opportunities.

The "poietic" logic of continuity-generating experiences is congruent with Amartya Sen's capability approach, where capabilities are defined as the substantive freedoms people have reason to value in pursuing and realizing ends. This line of argument closely relates to the concept of agency, closely related to the constructive engagement of people in their self-realization by directing their freedoms

towards the choice of functionings that have significance for their conception of a good life and values. In the pedagogical generativity framework, transformative development results when learners responsibly exercise their freedom of choice and action. The very concept of boundaries, then, is that thin dividing line between an individual's self and the ability to engage in powerful life-defining choices through mindful, purposeful, and responsible decision-making. Individual capacity for self-governance, self-organization, and even self-empowerment is the ability to negotiate a "boundary-less world" of constant reinvention.

Accordingly, the generative frame of reference adopts nonlinearity, plasticity, and complexity concepts to foster self-orientation and enable people to choose wisely in a manner that befits their talents, wishes, and aptitudes. According to this view, life planning is viewed as a process of engaging in generative reflexivity through an existential journey, making generativity palpable by realizing and facilitating self-discovery-as-an-End-in-Itself-notion instead of solely as a means (Mannese, 2016).

This transformative journey involves a journey of self-reclamation and self-empowerment for an individual to come to the recognition of his potential and engage in dynamic, transformative actions where generativity is manifested. Thus, according to Mannese (2022), pedagogical generativity makes a non-place of change and underscores the need for creating a learning environment that fosters the enhancement of soft skills, which form the pedestal of personal and professional blossoming.

The approach of generative teaching emphasizes that learning should involve the active creation and generation of knowledge by students, rather than simply the passive reception of information. With this, there is a demand for students to have "career management skills" which represent the information, attitudes, and skills required for effective management and transition through educational and career development (Savickas, 2014). Thus, an embedding of soft skills development in higher education curricula will make universities capable of preparing future teachers to introduce collaborative classrooms and cope with the complicated problems of the modern education sector (Caggiano et al., 2020)

According to the literature, the infusion of soft skills supports not only the single educator but also the excellence of teaching practice in general (Ricciardi, 2021). By developing a collaborative and reflective culture, generative pedagogy enables universities to be more responsive to labour market requirements and thus better align outcomes with employer expectations. (Bastos et al., 202).

This, therefore, becomes the demand-bridging gap between the outcomes of education and employers. Hence, the transformation of higher education through soft skills training is a precondition of quality in developing an adjustable teaching personality capable of being constructive for society.

TEACHER TRAINING IN ITALY AND FINLAND: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, enhancing higher education teaching quality has garnered significant attention at both national and international levels. The European Union has emphasised this importance in its renewed agenda for higher education (2017), recognising the need to elevate the status of teaching, which has historically been overshadowed by research output (European Commission, 2016). For universities of applied sciences and vocational education, training is compulsory; for other teachers, conventional professional development is still more common (Jokikokko & Uitto, 2017). Finnish universities provide pedagogical subject-matter training within ten to 60 ECTS credit programs. Easier, more flexible education that includes far more learners—such as doctoral students and researchers—is needed enormously (Teräs, 2016). UNIPS makes an institutional arrangement for university pedagogical support, which can provide courses in self-study or guided study to encourage collaborative knowledge creation between educators (Vilppu et al., 2019). There remain still some problems with the extension of face-to-face training that, for example, would fit the work of a teacher. This is obtained in Italy with Law 107/2015, which obliges the extension of an 'obligation,' an educational demand. This Bill amends the 'Education Act 2011' to place in law that professional development is defined in regulations, places the requirement for its provision to be in paid working

hours on the employer, and gives primacy of place to the teaching profession. The regulatory framework sets out the new measures with teacher-issued personal development cards and a national three-year training plan that sets out the needs and actions for training across every educational institution. The requirement is at the tenured teacher level across levels, from the nursery to the secondary school level. Local schools have set this duty in quantifying within the Educational Units' scope of work, like training points, yet giving freedom to teachers to choose their path for training. This has to make sure that educators are not being pressed into certain training programs or a fixed number of training hours if objectives are being achieved. Teacher training is to be monitored by the Ministry of Education, with simple instructions and includes the main fields that should be developed: social inclusion, classroom management, digital culture, and teaching methods. While in Italy training measures are comprehensive. In the two countries, due to different initiatives, teachers can choose to implement or follow accredited external sources of training. This sort of dual approach allows for a tailor-made professional development experience that is reflective of the unique needs of educators in different contexts. As both countries grapple with complicated systems of teacher training, there is an increasing appreciation of the key role that soft skills play in improving educational practices with due consideration to preparing educators for the modern labour market's challenges.

Pre-Service Training for Teachers: Navigating Orientation and Educational Practices

Is Finland's highly regarded pre-service teacher training program the primary factor contributing to student success? While Finnish teachers are indeed well-educated, often holding master's degrees after extensive university studies, they are not alone. Numerous countries, including France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, the Slovak Republic, and Scotland, also require four or more years of full-time education for primary and class teachers (OECD, 2005a, p. 106). For lower secondary educators, nations such as Austria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Scotland have similar or even more demanding educational requirements than those found in Finland (OECD, 2005a, p. 106). For example, in France, aspiring teachers undergo a competitive post-degree program through the Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maitres, culminating in a rigorous national state exam, which demands a study load comparable to or exceeding that of Finnish educators. More recent data (OECD, 2013c, p. 97) indicate that Finland is not unique in having a lengthy pre-service training duration (over 4.3 years); other countries, including Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, and Spain, also follow suit. The compiled OECD data suggests that the length of pre-service training, the level of degree (undergraduate or graduate), or the type of institution (public or private) may not be the sole determinants of teacher effectiveness or student performance on standardised assessments. Moreover, comparisons between Finland and regions such as Flanders, which has a less rigorous pre-service program lasting only three years (OECD, 2013c, p. 316), yield contrasting student performance results on PISA assessments. Similarly, when juxtaposing Finland with countries like France and Germany—where pre-service training is considerably more demanding—the differences in student outcomes are not as pronounced as expected. It is interesting to note that both Finland and Italy have been placed together in the discussions on “long-duration preservice training programs,” yet their juxtaposed performance results over the past decade reveal a startling contrast (OECD, 2013c, p. 97). Indeed, the variability in the quality, depth, and rigour of subject studies and practical experiences, among other intrinsic qualities of the pre-service training programs, can be regarded as the legitimacy of an appropriate comparative study (Tryggvason, 2009). Also, according to the OECD, competition examinations for the entry of teachers and rather lengthy programs exist in member countries as diverse as Austria, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Korea, Mexico and Turkey (OECD, 2013c, p. 97). This does not strip away from the vital fact that clustering very dissimilar education systems might camouflage important variations in teacher attraction, training practice, and its resulting impact on academic outcomes. All in all,

teacher quality is, by far, a much larger domain that involves motivation, attitude, collaboration, and collegial interaction. These factors might equally play a very significant role in the achievement of educational success; therefore, the answer to why countries do better with an education system than other countries can not only be attributed to the differences in the structure of their pre-service training programs.

EXPLORING SOFT SKILLS PROFILES IN EDUCATORS: AN APPLIED RESEARCH APPROACH TO ENHANCING TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS AND WORKFORCE READINESS

The above approach, in this regard, would ensure that student dynamics and meaningful interaction are the prime requisites of effective teaching. The revelations that come while exploring the educational impact of soft skills place a demand for teachers to receive in-service education. This now has transferred the demand to fit teachers into an evolving education landscape that accomplishes subject mastery through more training that seeks to integrate other superior interpersonal skills in negotiating a labyrinth of classroom complexities ability. These can occur through induction programs with colleagues and the initiation of joint lessons that will allow them to develop these particular elements for the benefit of the individual and profession as a whole. In summary, the existing research justifies pursuing more research in soft skills and educational reform. The in-depth analysis of the relationship between soft skills and effectiveness in teaching helps in appropriately situating how best to develop curricula and trainees to acquire required competencies so that both educators and learners are granted optimum benefits from the educational experience. A powerful research methodology comprehensively probed educators' soft skills profiles in different cultural contexts. This study design embraced both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a holistic view of competencies affecting teaching efficacy and preparedness of the workforce. The study is part of two specific groups of educators from Italy and Finland across a section of descriptive research that sought to bring out the nuances of soft skills, drawn by different educational traditions, and social values.

Participants: A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted to assess the profiles of soft and digital skills among two groups of educators from Italy and Finland. The sample included 160 secondary school teachers, with 80 participants from Italy (primarily from the Rome area) and 80 from Finland (mainly from the Turku region). This geographical distribution resulted from the collaboration between Roma Tre University and TUAS (University of Applied Sciences of Turku), facilitated by cultural networks established during the Nordic Summer School at the TUAS Department of Pedagogy. The Italian cohort comprised 63% females and 37% males, whereas the Finnish group comprised 83% females and 17% males. Participants' ages ranged from 30 to 65 years, with a mean age of 45.79. All individuals provided informed consent for their participation in the research data analysis.

Instruments and Procedure: Each participant completed the Business-Focused Inventory of Personality (BIP) questionnaire (Hossiep et al., 2003), which included a personal profile outlining their soft skills. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first gathered sociodemographic data (gender, age, origin) and educational background (university attended and degree type), while the second focused on self-assessment of soft skills. The BIP included 14 scales grouped into four domains, assessing five critical soft skills: the ability to establish contacts, teamwork orientation, sensitivity, assertiveness, and social desirability (Liechti et al., 2017)This scale question had some of the worst scores in the entire questionnaire, showing that little seriousness was used when responding. Only those variables influencing the different European nationalities were made available for analysis. Data collection for the Italian sample was done in July 2022, while that of the Finnish sample was carried out in September 2022. Better insight into the research was provided by interviews with expert educators and administrators in a focused group from Finland and Italy. The focus of this

qualitative study was on establishing the basic insights leading to the recommendations for effective ways of improving soft skills. Emphasis was placed on ensuring that the research procedures carry impact within an organizational set-up in areas requiring collaboration, communication, and innovation. They were also asked if they would like to be included in any future studies regarding training on soft skills. A significant 69.1% of Italian teachers expressed interest in continued involvement, while only 13.5% of Finnish educators declined to participate in further studies on the topic analysis.

Analysis and Results: The data analysis aimed to uncover the soft skills profiles of educators from Italy and Finland, emphasising the cultural differences that may influence these competencies. The study sample consisted of 160 teachers, evenly split between the two countries, with a balanced gender representation: 78% of Italian teachers and 62% of Finnish teachers were female. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to check whether variations in the distribution of soft skills across different age groups were significant. The Dunn test was also used to compare the levels of soft skills among the groups that were formed. An additional analysis was also performed to check the relationship between the teachers' soft skills and the digital competencies that they possessed. The levels of digital skills were tested by using the Europass online tool. Only in the Italian case did no important difference emerge for the comparison between soft skills and digital competencies. The differences in the skills of the Finnish and Italian teachers were, however, very considerable. For example, the Finnish teachers showed much higher skills in establishing contacts and teamwork than the Italian teachers, especially concerning the age dimension. Both groups showed very high levels of assertiveness and concern for fostering interpersonal relationships, but the Finnish teachers scored themselves higher on these counts compared with their Italian counterparts, and the difference was statistically significant. The Italian teachers had given more of the scoring to the item on sensitivity and ability to establish contact, reflecting cultural values marked by placing importance on feelings between people and emotional receptiveness. Contact and social desirability were rated higher by Finnish female teachers than by male teachers.

This was, conversely, higher for sensitivity and assertiveness self-rated by male teachers from both countries. Significantly high scores of female teachers for social desirability in both groups showed that they were generally inclined to portray more socially desirable self-images. These findings would seem to suggest consensually distinct cultural influences on the self-perceptions of teachers. Educators from Finland are more assertive and oriented toward work than their Italian counterparts because dominance is on cooperative and innovative work according to the Finnish education system. Educators from Italy show more sensibility and contact acceptance, giving more weight to interpersonal relationship culture. These somewhat resonate with findings from earlier research on the infusion of soft skills that have already found relevance, specifically in light of globalization and technological developments (Ngang et al., 2015; Tang, 2018). A possible interpretation of the results might be that, although both groups own indispensable soft skills, the focus on different particular competencies may reflect some underpinning cultural dimensions and pedagogical practices inherent in each country. The results found from this analysis dictate that there is a very real need for specific professional development programs concerning some identified deficiencies of the soft skills within each grouping of educators. Finnish teachers need better training in interpersonal skills than just communication and sensitivity; Italian teachers need to be more assertive and oriented towards teamwork. In such a way, everything implemented by way of tailoring in-service training to educators' real peculiarly specific needs allows educational institutions to create much more effectual teaching staff to adequately meet a modern labour market. The comparative analysis of soft skills for educators from Italy and Finland provides some eye-openers on the cultural dimensions of teaching effectiveness. This demands that urgent curricular reforms initiate the implantation of soft skills

development within programs of teacher education to build a qualified and adaptive teaching community within the increasingly integrated world.

CONCLUSIONS

Exploring soft skills in educators The analysis of soft skills in teachers underscores the pertinent call for the infusion of these competencies in teachers' education and professional development programs as the educational requisites continue to blow about change. A cross-country comparison of the profiles of teachers' soft skills in Italy and Finland points to large cultural influences in the formation of these competencies and underlines the need for specific training programs coherent with the very different educational contexts in each country. While in both cases strong and weak dimensions of competencies are similarly regarded, they vary widely in terms of what these dimensions include. The Finnish teachers are more assertive and better team workers, showing more social collaboration in their teaching practice, whilst the Italians show more sensibility and social closeness because their culture gives more weight to personal relationships.
These results
indicate that the teacher training programs need to be changed to meet the responsiveness requirements of the teachers and the teachers. From the above discussion, the following theme can be observed as the quality of teaching and practical experiences and the intrinsic motivation of teachers lead to building a successful student. The provision of professional development focused on soft skills within the teacher education curricula would enable the teachers to effectively manage the complexities involved in today's classrooms. This development leads not only to efficacy in teaching but strong attention and desirability of the same toward improving students. Focusing on interpersonal competencies will finally bridge the gap between the current education systems and the demands of the labour market by preparing teacher trainees to execute well in varied learning environments.

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