

Tutors' relational professionalism and care-based personalisation in Italy: Facilitating innovation in a formalist school culture

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Abstract

Progressivist approaches to teaching and learning are rare in the Italian school system. Equality of inputs, whole class teaching and curriculum transmission are preferred. However, the case of a vocational education and training (VET) programme, run by a private State-recognised school, shows a way forward to introduce personalised approaches in school systems characterised by formalist pedagogies. Constructivist teaching and personalised education are not, as a rule, promoted by teachers at the classroom level, due to a complexity of structural and organisational reasons that this paper will present. The difficult task of supporting fragile pupils who have experienced failure within the State school system is addressed by tutors-educators operating at the school and individual levels. We show how tutors' relational professionalism and their role of care are valuable instructional and educational resources. The data reported are based on direct observations, semi-structured interviews, and follow-up focus groups with key actors in the field. This theory-testing case study shows how a formalist culture of whole class curriculum-focused teaching has evolved into a student-centred organisational model. The 'affective' aspect of justice in schools represents a way forward to facilitate radical innovation in formalist cultures, in order to adapt teaching and learning to all students.

Key-words: personalisation, Italian education, relational professionalism, tutors' professionalism

Introduction

As is the case with other schools around the world, the Italian education system is largely based on a formalist pedagogical model, with a strong focus on teaching and on curriculum transmission. This involves the assimilation of abstract theoretical knowledge in a passive way. At the same time, there is a growing worldwide awareness of the relevance of constructivist approaches in "the context of teaching" (Mills et al., 2017) or in school settings that are culturally more distinct (Schweisfurth, 2020; Anderson & Mundy, 2014). These approaches can be particularly supportive of more vulnerable and disengaged students in mainstream schools and classes, as well as in alternative programmes (Mills & McGregor, 2015; Mills et al., 2016).

Progressivist approaches are conceptualised as differentiation (Burnett, et al., 2016), personalisation (OECD, 2006) or adaptive teaching (Parsons et al., 2018). On one hand, personalisation of education has been seen as an umbrella concept including a variety of practices such as formative feedback, students' entitlement to curriculum choice, and differentiated learning based on personal learning targets (Campbell et al., 2007). On the other, differentiation is more specifically related to multiple approaches to content, process, and outcome and implies a substantial connection with assessment for learning or feedback (Tomlinson, 2005). Adaptive teaching is another route to support students' needs, with 'on the spot' decision-making (Sherin et al., 2008), and responses in the immediate context of the student-teacher interaction (Gallagher, et al., 2020). A new reading of differentiation goes beyond narrow functional definitions and closely connects it to social justice and care (Mills et al., 2017). This study shows that this theory is also particularly useful as regards teaching innovation through student-centred and socially-just approaches, when the larger school context, and particularly the school leadership, is supportive (Day et al, 2016).

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Innovation can assume different paths and means different things in different contexts. An understanding of the Italian situation is crucial to appreciate the type of innovation introduced in this case and a specific subsection is given later in this paper. It is, however, necessary to introduce at this early stage some key aspects about this school system. Italian higher secondary schooling after age 14 follows a selective path, with academic, technical and vocational schools selecting students based on their academic performance. The final two years of compulsory schooling can be completed in vocational schools, the least prestigious track, with a high percentage of less able and disadvantaged pupils.

Three major aspects of this system should be highlighted:

- (1) All three selective tracks focus on content transmission, from which personalised forms of teaching are virtually absent, as well as clear care-related teachers' tasks (their contract covers only the teaching class workload of 18 hours for primary and 24 for secondary).
- (2) State-recognised private low-fees schools of any type and level, including VET, (*paritarie*, with State recognised degree-granting powers and benefitting from a voucher scheme) perform a public service function but are less prestigious overall; they may offer some forms of care and personalisation, and teachers' contracts may include more tasks beyond class teaching and lengthier working schedules.
- (3) Whilst of a lower quality compared to State-maintained schools, private low-fees schools perform a remedial role (Bertola et al., 2007), offering provision for less able and excluded pupils, most of them expelled by the mainstream selective (State-run) schools after repeating years or dropping out altogether

A VET private low-fees school represents a twofold lower-level choice (both as vocational and State-recognised), and is therefore dominated, as a rule, by more disadvantaged and less able students. It offers alternative provision for students at risk of dropping out and lower achievers whose prior school experience has been negative.

Tutors represent a professional figure specific to VET schools, whose margins to act in innovative ways are determined by the level of school autonomy, higher in State-recognised schools such as this one than in State-run schools. In addition, and compared to mainstream education, regionally financed and State-recognised (private) vocational programmes are shorter, make greater use of laboratories and work experience, along with offering faster access to the job market. In this specific school and enjoying the specific autonomy of a private low-fees organisation, tutors complement teachers' work and therefore take on a wider range of tasks related not just to vocational training, apprenticeships and school-work alternation but to mainstream classroom education: (1) personalised support to students; (2) definition of flexible measures and initiatives to deal with learning gaps; (3) management of relationships with students' families and pastoral care; and (4) provision of learning material and equipment.

In this context, we investigate how tutors' relational professionalism advances a student-centred organisational and pedagogical model and identify 2 RQs:

RQ1 To what extent and how does the caring role of tutors-educators help re-centre instruction on pupils' needs in school contexts?

RQ2 To what extent and how is relational professionalism a key instructional and educational tutors' resource for pupils, parents, and teachers?

Theoretical Framework

Personalised education and care for the whole person

Personalisation at the school and class level is a complex pedagogical paradigm that can improve

achievements and wellbeing in schools. Its plural meanings are both theoretical and also contextually stratified in various education policies around the world (Mincu, 2012). Therefore, personalisation or differentiation is assumed to be not only a matter of recent education politics concerned with school customers and their choices, but foremost a pedagogical theory seen as particularly relevant in dealing with the current changes to schools. While Campbell and colleagues (2007) wonder if personalisation is generalisable across age, ability and class, most scholars consider a universalist approach to be necessary (Fullan, 2012, Fielding, 2012). Personalisation allows teachers to define personal targets and to support pupils through formative assessment, as well as to identify personal ways to access the curriculum. To ensure personal progress, observations, recurrent monitoring and adaptive support are key strategies, as well as maintaining motivation and metacognition through problem-based learning. Such concepts and strategies have been developed in response to the need to accurately diagnose students' needs, as well as to support their morale and engage with the whole person (Fitzsimmons, Trigg & Premkumar, 2021) with her social and emotional skills. Thus, a key pedagogical tool is the very nature of the student-teacher relationship, particularly in supporting fragile, vulnerable students, which entails a humanistic approach to teaching and personal growth (Fielding, 2012). The personal relationship between student and tutor is central in alternative provision, as well as the importance of 'affective' and 'contributive' aspects of justice in schools (Mills et al., 2015), in other words as love, care and solidarity in the first case and in terms of what people can give to society in the latter. The tension between cognitive attainment and the pastoral care that prioritises students' personal growth can be visible in the organisational model, the types of processes in place (teaching and evaluation for instance) and can also be reflected in the employment of different types of professionals who are called upon to address these two dimensions separately. From this point of view, it is important to enact an organisational model at both the school and classroom level that can address cognitive, social and emotional aspects from a systemic perspective. Innovative approaches to teaching and monitoring pupils' work and classroom performance are usually benefitted by mentoring schemes, extracurricular support with homework and pastoral care (Husbands & Lang, 2000)

[Figure 1 here]

Tutors' relational professionalism

In some contexts, cognitive development and care for the whole person are two different tasks: class teachers are charged with the first, while various educators or tutors are responsible for the second. Tutoring roles are assigned to different professionals, such as teaching assistants, vocational and educational guidance counsellors and pastoral carers. In France, for instance, vocational and educational guidance counsellors are established professionals providing support in relation to students' academic and professional careers. They are tasked with ensuring students' motivation and wellbeing, supporting SEN students, setting up personalised educational paths and vocational guidance programmes and tackling early school leaving. Their role is very broad, drawing up individual and group programmes. They have direct contact with families, help students do their homework and look after them during lunch and other breaks, whilst monitoring their morale. In England, teaching assistants (TAs) support students or groups of students who struggle. Nevertheless, their direct impact has been questioned in relation to the cognitive process (Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013). However, TAs do not play a fundamental role as educators.

The tutor-educators in alternative support programmes perform a number of pastoral care duties both inside and outside the classroom (e.g. welcoming students in the morning, monitoring them, bringing students to the gym or internship host organisations, sharing lunch with them, informally seeking to understand 'how things are going', making phone calls with parents and employers). These tasks are achieved on a one-to-one basis and concern the behavioural and emotional dimension of ensuring student success. The role also includes organising study groups, supporting individual progress, conducting motivational interviews, and supporting behaviour management.

Tutor-educators are focused on pastoral care, positive relationships between adults and students, as well as on mediation processes between student and school, family and, in the case of a VET

programme such as this one, the training provider or workplace. Their professionalism is of a relational type, dealing with students' inclusion, motivation, general wellbeing and care, and their soft skills in school and beyond.

As indicated, tutor-educators negotiate solutions to conflict and differences when they arise. This can be due to young people's experiences of trauma, neglect and abuse (Morgan et al., 2015). In this as in other schools, students are affected by depression, social malaise, and other relational issues. Rather than exhibiting serious behavioural problems, they are submissive and fragile students who struggle with a difficult past, can be absent from school or show poor resilience.

Relational professionalism can be defined as focused specifically on identity and resilience building of young people in schools. The intense relational web that the educator creates around fragile students, in constant dialogue with teachers, parents and other school and community actors, is key to supporting inner identity qualities such as motivation, self-efficacy, resilience and commitment. Such professionalism, based primarily on caring and supportive relationships, is also a major tool that facilitates radical innovation of the school model as directly experienced by students. Their input to classroom pedagogy consists of pedagogical mediation actions and negotiation strategies with classroom teachers in order to adapt curriculum requirements and evaluation practices to students' needs. Relational professionalism relies on a strong community ethos and a robust socialisation interpretation of personalisation as a whole student approach.

Methodology

This study follows the case study methodology as developed by Thomas (2011). This VET programme is financed by public money and run by a private school. As such, it represents an outlier case, compared to the other types of public schools that are also publicly run but share some common characteristics with other State-recognised schools, such as school autonomy and other tasks beyond teaching, including care-related duties. However, the teachers employed reflect a pedagogical script that is reinforced by the public system as their first introduction to the teaching profession. The school organisation and culture are shaped by the needs of the student population. One major strategy is the presence of tutors, a *sui generis* school professional figure, complementary to classroom teachers. Thus, this case study exemplifies the way a formalist culture of whole class teaching and curriculum focus can be gradually transformed into a personalised, student-centred organisational model. The tool is the relational professionalism of tutors. The subject of this case study is this VET programme, while the object or the analytical framework considers how to effectively introduce a culture of progressivism. The purpose of this study is to investigate the process of crystallisation of a systemic organisational model of personalisation through the input of tutors' relational professionalism. The research aim is therefore intrinsic and heuristic, as it is configured as theory testing through a single snapshot case (Thomas, 2011).

[Table 1 here]

At the time this study was conducted (2019-2020), 11 tutors and one tutor coordinator were employed, each supporting one or two classes (25 to 50 students). Area coordinators supervised junior tutors and, indirectly, their group of students, in an ongoing collaboration between senior and junior professionals. Tutors could be assigned to a different class every year but retained permanent responsibility for specific training activities and the supervision of students' technical skills development in areas such as woodworking, textiles, and catering.

Fieldwork (i.e. qualitative data collection) started on 13 November 2019, through two informal talks with the tutor coordinator, followed by a number of classroom observations in December. In January, three interviews and nine classroom observations were organised. One interview took place among textile course participants, and the other two involved a tutor and a group of students. Nine interviews were conducted in February 2020, while in March and April, seven semi-structured interviews were carried out remotely. A final meeting was arranged in June in the form of a focus group with some tutors and their coordinator, in order to provide feedback on the data collected. This article has also

benefitted from internal research material and working tools, such as student portfolios and staff meeting minutes. The authors teamed up as an external observer (first author) and an internal voice (second author, a member of the leadership team and head of the research and development unit of this VET centre).

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

School Context and Vision

As already mentioned, in the wider Italian context and in relation to VET, ‘personalisation’ refers to tools made available just to SEN students who are entitled to personalised services because of certified learning difficulties. As stated in the relevant legislation (Regione Lombardia, 2014), “special tests” or personalised programmes concern “students with a certified disability”. However, the regional legislation does try to develop this further to support a universal approach, specifying that

Personalisation refers not only to measures targeting individual students or groups, but is a dimension characterising the entire learning process, the basis on which all learning situations and programmes are established. (2013, p. 5)

Unfortunately, given the current teaching culture and curriculum practices, this is a somewhat unrealistic expectation. A centralisation paradigm (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006) is linked quite paradoxically to the lack of national and school policies related to curriculum matters and behaviour, for instance. Moreover, large margins of teachers’ autonomy (on curriculum matters Italy ranks highest in the world in TALIS (OECD, 2020) make them not accountable to peers or school leadership, and render the school system fragmented and loose. From the perspective of a cohesion/regulation matrix (Malin et al., 2020) an essentially individualistic school culture is additionally characterised by fatalism, because of a certain degree of rule-bound thinking, and by formal egalitarianism, in that there are school bodies and commissions on which teachers are strongly represented. In addition, and more significantly for the above-mentioned egalitarianism, classroom pedagogy adopts undifferentiated whole class teaching and homogeneous approaches towards the achievement of uniform learning standards. This choice, which is a deeply rooted cultural script, appears to most teachers (and parents) as equitable and fair. In particular, secondary school teaching is based largely on summative evaluation, direct unstructured teaching and rote memorisation (Fondazione Agnelli, 2017). The school curriculum focuses largely on content (the ‘what’) and not the processes (‘how’) of teaching and learning and this fact can be explained by weak teacher preparation. In addition, State-run schools are severely underfunded to adequately provide a quality learning environment, do not make use of school assemblies, and have weak school policies and leadership, e.g. in terms of school vision or behaviour management coherence.

Against this background, which should be read as a powerful pattern rather than an essentialist portrait, we will sketch the innovative learning environment and practices of our case study.

The ethos of privately funded low-fee schools in Italy is largely communitarian, with a strong pastoral care orientation. Caring for less motivated students or for those who are more exposed to the risk of early school leaving is visible in a number of ways: promoting space aesthetics, providing guidance not only on school matters but on wider life issues, and ensuring tutor presence in social interactions during lunch and other breaks.

This school has developed a specific approach to behaviour management of potentially disruptive students, most of whom have struggled in mainstream State schools (either underachieving or dropping out early), using the design of the learning environment as a potential tool. From their first day in school, students are encouraged to care for the physical environment and quickly understand that carelessness would be neither appropriate nor tolerated. Unlike most public schools, sanctions are not the preferred way to deal with misbehaviour. The school has created its own routines to signal the school vision and to provide effective care, such as morning assemblies given by the charismatic founder of the centre and the education community, to deal with student fatigue, provide structure

and manage daily transitions. In addition, and most relevant, the school community is robustly built through substantial professional learning opportunities focused on the monitoring of specific students and teamwork between the various professionals involved, as well as with the wider community and the families themselves, who are very often contacted by the school staff.

These teachers have been shaped by the Italian pedagogical culture and are fundamentally subject-matter specialists, with a very weak initial education component. ITE for secondary school teachers has been particularly weak and volatile over the years (Mincu, 2019) and their teaching practices are mainly influenced by the larger institutional context and their previous schooling. Innovative practices suggested through professional training and offered by this school are to be seen in discontinuity with the scarcity of alternative pedagogical scripts in the larger school system. Therefore, teachers may experience dissonance in the way they understand their profession. Conversely, tutors undergo more specific initial training as educators (a 3-year university preparation) and have a less scripted professional profile.

The school has developed a shared pedagogical culture that ensures cohesion. The learning community is based on a clear vision, which draws on a problem-based approach. A ‘real task’ vocational strategy combines a problem presented to students with a real assignment, although this still meets with some resistance, due to the wider pedagogical culture:

You have to bring kids into play, the self can be discovered through action. If you give only an explanation, you provide no room for personalisation, because you do not allow the kid to express, either in positive or negative terms, let’s be clear... The core of personalisation is that action should take place in the classroom. You don’t teach history; you give them a history or maths problem. (Head-teacher)

In summary, while the school curriculum is formally aligned with the national Italian curriculum and its paradigm, it is taught within a solid learning community context in which personalisation for all students is accepted and nurtured. Nonetheless, the role of the educators as locally conceived is key to contributing effectively to personalised learning.

Data Presentation

The strategic intent in the employment of tutors and their roles

Regional legislation requires that there should be a tutor in each vocational training centre to manage school-work alternation. However, in this school, this function has a mostly educational character and is concerned with creating a tailor-made path through activities and projects intended to promote educational success and individual excellence, so the support to specific vocational training is just one of the many elements of their role. In fact, as explained by one tutor, “personalisation is about a number of daily actions which do not target any one individual, because some situations are fine the way they currently are”. Tutors are charged with the task of ensuring that students learn not only subjects, but the whole educational proposal:

It is a type of support provided to the teacher to know the students and their struggle and to help teachers work together. I think that in cross-cutting projects the tutor is a sort of ‘event organiser’, unlike the teacher, who is asked to keep a certain attitude with students. It is about a professional and human relationship, which at times leads to disagreements and misunderstandings, which are necessary to understand each other...(Int 2)

The cycle followed by tutors, which features elements of both disruption and openness, is highly personalised. The tutor supervises students in all their activities (support, observation and monitoring in workshops, in their company and at school). They share what they have observed with colleagues and then talk to students.

[Figure 1 here]

The tutoring method is formalised into four stages: observation, supervision, planning and assessment.

[Table 4 here]

Tutors classify their approach as follows: (1) personalisation in teaching to fill the gaps and adequately support students’ needs, (2) personalisation in vocational training and orientation, and (3) adaptive support based on written documentation such as minutes of the meetings between tutors and

parents, a vital resource to track relevant events, making an unscheduled phone call, for instance. There are other monitoring tools, such as the post-internship reports. At the end of the year, tutors compile a portfolio including year-round meeting minutes into a single file, shared with the team of tutors.

However, tutors enable learning in a significant way, as they put forward suggestions in relation to class organisation, ways of working which are more suitable to each student or teaching strategies. The way tutors interact with teachers can be equated to an ever-moving boundary. Tutors are no longer silent observers in the classroom but educators who can provide a full picture of students. At the same time, tutors are aware they neither replace nor delegitimise teachers, as both of them perform different educational functions.

The enactment of the tutors' role

While tutors make use of formal instruments, they suggest that their real tools are those resulting from spontaneous actions as adaptive support, such as class observations and talks with students of different degrees of formality. The pastoral care relationship therefore is key and is renewed every day through the tutors' morning welcome in the classroom:

I personally like when I ask students to hand in their cell phones. I meet all of them, they make a line and give me their mobile. You have a moment with them, a look, a joke about their jersey, the girl with or without make up. They feel noticed; they feel it is a good day. (Int 5)

Tutors' reports are a mix of formality and informality. These are vital tools because everything concerning individuals or groups is tracked. The time allocated to write the report is between 2 and 4 hours per week. They detail not only difficult issues but also positive behaviour, for example those who voluntarily decide to stay at school in the afternoon. Although there is a formal obligation to submit these reports, they are primarily functional, in order to better help tutors. Some tutors provide personal reports when engaged in observation, as they may be asked to justify their evaluation:

I learned to write reports: how students deal with others, relationships at work, strengths etc. I use it this way, because I don't want to miss a thing about what happens, I ask for feedback because sometimes it is easy to form an idea of the kid, which you impose. It is important to connect the dots, trying to be objective, to be detached. (Int. 8)

Related to our RQ1, there is a natural progression from tutorial support to support in teaching, more generally. Both teacher and tutor cooperate on questions related to general pedagogy, learning and teaching strategies, teaching differentiation, and soft skills evaluation. In this interaction, supportive and diplomatic relationships with teachers are fundamental. Tutors may make suggestions about teaching strategies, either spontaneously or at the teachers' request. A caring perspective makes them actively promote interdisciplinary teaching, asking teachers to carve out time to develop specific projects:

A given lesson might not be suitable to the age of students or to the students we are dealing with [...] At the end of the lesson, usually in the afternoon, I feel myself lucky because I can talk freely with my colleagues: "You know, I saw that students struggle with this kind of lesson. When I am free, let's try to propose some group work and let's see how it goes..." Younger kids have more difficulties in managing 'frontal' [i.e. direct teaching] ... more interactive things are needed, but we talk freely. (Int 4)

The tutor's trained eye is an important tool in both implementing and engaging in the personalisation process. It provides input to both general pedagogy and specific subject matter, complementing the teacher's expertise. The tutor may suggest more interactive teaching strategies, group work or other alternative teaching solutions benefitting students:

We do not manage the cognitive aspects, but we look for ways in which all students will benefit from the lesson. We are in the classroom to support, together with the other teacher, who helps those with cognitive issues. It is a sort of teamwork involving teachers and co-teaching activities. (Int 1)

Related to RQ2, tutors act through a web of relationships to a variety of actors in the field, in particular students themselves. For instance, when it comes to students' behaviour and resilience, tutors feel this is part of their expertise:

We intervene on student behaviour, we always talk with the teacher and look for ways to get students involved – group work or ways to place them centre stage – asking the teacher about the right moment to do some mini-lessons with them. Obviously, we cannot do this with all students, so we proceed through a trial and error

approach. (Int 1)

Tutors also cooperate with teachers in relation to evaluation, as during teaching staff meetings they discuss grades or possible solutions, within the context of individual learning paths. They do not claim to be ‘do-gooders’ and do not consider teachers to be strict. Yet, it is illustrative that it is the task of tutors to encourage those students who are dissatisfied with their grades or to point out when students should be praised for their performance:

We need to talk to students frequently and explain to them the evaluation they receive. While it seems like a huge effort, it is always necessary to encourage... but it is also nice to praise someone for a good grade. We cheer up students who receive bad grades, explain the reasons for them. (Int 5)

Another important aspect is the expertise gained in terms of communication with students. Tutors can suggest that teachers use specific communication strategies: “if they talk to them head on, they might get no answer” (Int 3). In other cases, it is a relational negotiation, a complex activity of building on suggestions, sometimes moving into general pedagogy:

It happens with a class... there is a kid who has problems approaching the teacher. A solution is needed because the student ditches school to avoid her. There is a need to mediate with the teacher, who is, among other things, old school ... a very rigid, old-style teacher. So mediation is particularly problematic in this case. I suggested engaging in research work on a given topic to break the ice, rather than give questions and make an assessment. I suggested presenting research in front of the class. (Int 4)

Progress comes from implementing effective strategies to be carefully adopted for groups or individual students, providing more space for the individual and more flexibility in terms of content and evaluation. One of the main issues to deal with is to review and adapt the curriculum in an innovative way, starting from actual problems that can be solved through problem-based learning.

Discussion: How relational professionalism can facilitate innovation in a formalist pedagogical culture

As has been shown, various structural aspects render this organisation exceptional in its processes and philosophy. Under the regional law for VET partnerships, a private school with a strong communitarian ethos gets public finance to deal with fragile pupils who have experienced failure within the State school system. These students attend their last two years of compulsory schooling and after a third year have the chance to obtain a professional diploma that may facilitate their transition to work. The tutor’s role is key to guiding their vocational choice towards their working life, but this study also shows the significant impact that the educators may have specifically on classroom pedagogy.

The paper does not allow us to fully portray the pedagogical culture, which serves here as criteria against which we can understand the important innovation introduced by tutors. Italian teachers follow a one-size-fits-all approach on a transmission model with the school curriculum following the same learning objectives, assessed through frequent summative evaluation against a unique external standard. As mentioned previously, teachers in this school are more in line with the larger school system ethos, whilst the school culture and the more flexible definition of tutors as school actors are radically different from what they might experience elsewhere. The larger school system ethos and the ways in which the curriculum, evaluation and objectives are conceived in a homogeneous way affect teachers’ capacity to envisage problem-based learning, individual solutions and formative evaluation:

The main difficulty is that teachers are used to a certain approach and nobody ever asked them to change. They have always acted in the same way for which they are not accountable. Resistance to change mostly originates from teachers’ established approach. (Executive manager)

Therefore, the wider school ethos and the presence of tutors operating at the school and individual level have a significant impact on teachers’ practices. In cooperation with teachers, tutors play a key role in personalisation, not only to adapt training projects to current labour market needs but also to transform and ‘humanise’ classroom teaching. The aim is to avoid a situation where the subjects taught in class are perceived as not relevant by students, because it is in their daily effort to solve

problems that students revalue the desire for knowledge. The same pastoral care relationship is the main engine behind the transformation of the curriculum into one relevant for life. Conversations with the school management team point to a willingness to devote more time to workshops and support those who struggle. Thus, tutors must be able to understand how to provide guidance. When they deal with a ‘development block’, they must develop personalised strategies or solutions to advise students effectively.

Moreover, tutors are critical of the system and its foundations, e.g. the distinction between education and work, as if one were easier than the other, according to an established hierarchy. Indeed, “a contradiction arises. Because of maladaptive behaviour at school, a kid is better off at work” (Int 7). The pastoral care relationship as the cornerstone of relational professionalism is evident in tailor-made planning focussed on educational success, in terms of motivation for work and resilient identity. This implies either taking the pupil out of the classroom, or transforming classroom pedagogy. Failure is correctly seen by tutors to be produced by emotional factors such as anxiety. Therefore, tutors advise student groups, “considering their level, otherwise you lose them along the way” (Int 6)

Using paired discussions or ability groupings is very rare in State-run Italian schools and such heterogeneous groupings are relatively unstructured. As shown by an observational investigation (Fondazione Agnelli, 2017), whole class unstructured teaching is much more common. Therefore, the bottom-up suggestions to class teachers based on the actual experience of these tutors about what works for fragile students are an invaluable innovation.

Evaluation clarity is a central aspect of student wellbeing and morale, and pervasive grading practices are a source of frustration in this school, as in the wider Italian school system. The risk is that teachers may use grading as a form of punishment or against an external standard, not very explicit or coherently interpreted by teachers given their extensive autonomy. This school specifically tasks tutors with rebuilding morale after a demotivating summative evaluation. They deal with students’ responses to disappointment, discouragement or misunderstanding about grading which might not reflect the individual’s commitment or real potential. Unsurprisingly, developing an evaluation culture takes time and is a process to which everybody contributes, including tutors.

In spite of its communitarian ethos, even in this school, classroom teachers and tutors might be seen as epitomising two different dimensions: teaching vs. education, teaching rigour vs. care and relationship. There is, however, an awareness of the need to provide pedagogical alignment while having different roles. As far as evaluation is concerned, both tutor and teachers are committed to collaborate in order to identify innovative practices, such as the introduction of different grades to student commitment and their cognitive progress, most often spuriously undistinguished.

Tutors make up a close and well-equipped group that is able to deal with all aspects of personal development, thanks to their consolidated expertise developed over many years. They are seen as a stimulus over time to developing a pedagogical culture among teachers, turning the school into a community.

While personalisation is weak in State-run secondary schools in Italy, this privately-run but publicly financed vocational school characterises an innovative approach.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As has been suggested, constructivist approaches are not universal and many countries, such as Italy and France (Mincu & Granata, 2021) may strive to transform their school model. The reasons that hinder teachers to embrace personalisation in mainstream schooling, i.e. State-run schools, are both structural and cultural: teachers’ contracts, the paradox of a formally egalitarian and in substance individualist school culture, the way teachers perceive the curricular autonomy, and not least, the lack of cohesive school policies, and “the contradictions of the school autonomy model” with teaching staff policies still largely outside the sphere of influence of school leaders (Paletta et al., 2020).

Tutors’ bottom-up innovative work, supported by the school-community ethos of this organisation, represents a valuable example of the way to effectively instil a progressivist school model based on

care and 'affective justice'. In fact, newly hired teachers unfamiliar with this approach start thinking in terms of learner-centred pedagogy. Consequently, a personalisation model lays on various dimensions – motivation, adequate challenges, curriculum choice and relevance to personal needs, some incipient use of personal targets. All this is made possible by the complex role of tutors. Their responsibility is to identify and support soft skill development for both professional and personal life, through encouragement and re-motivation, which translate into many formal and informal actions. Dialogue, mediation and negotiation with the student themselves, the family and the other educational figures are key to gaining deep knowledge of each student and to supporting their development. One key question highlights tutors' passion and commitment: "What does the phrase 'caring for' mean in education and teaching?" The answer is given by the tutors themselves and is the premise for radically innovative classroom teaching practices: If teaching does not differ from education or tutoring, then caring for people and their motivation, supporting their self-confidence and personal identity should characterise both worlds. Thus, personalisation strategies correctly support students' learning commitment, by caring for them. The boundary between commitment and learning is blurred, as no distinction is made between in-school and out-of-school settings. By the same token, the adolescent is a single individual and the contexts in which they learn and work must demonstrate continuity in terms of vision and ways of acting. Tutors' perception of the need to ensure this continuity can be explained through various metaphors suggesting a relational and caring professionalism.

We are spiders that build webs connecting different points. Kids are the heart of everything. Our goal is that all dimensions connected to kids are connected, e.g. the company, the family, social services, the educator. If parents do not talk to each other, we have to make sure that the kids are aware of this connection, which is far from complete. We are like spurs. Sometimes we tell them "come on, let's go," but always respecting their freedom. (Int 3)

Tutors' border-crossing function, as well as their essential caring and mediating roles, enable them to be particularly aware of and expert in personalised approaches and strategies in the context of classroom teaching, especially in terms of communication, curriculum adaptations, student grouping, effects of summative evaluation and the need to generate a common culture regarding homework assignment. Inside this school, the classroom pedagogy exemplifies the encounter of the wider school system's cultural scripts with the school's innovative and student-centred philosophy. Tutors, stepping inside the classroom, actively contribute with their mediation skills and relational care professionalism to transforming teaching and learning and to effectively adapt learning to each student.

Whilst this case study is limited, we believe that a formalist pedagogical script can be transformed in the light of constructivism when adequate pedagogical knowledge and human resources, i.e. school tutors, are provided. Therefore, we formulate some recommendations, derived from this study that are pertinent not only to the Italian case but also to those contexts that share key system convergences in teachers' role and school organisation such as weak leadership and instruction-oriented teaching, or even textbook-based instruction in many countries (Smart et al., 2020):

- (1) More connections are needed between different types of schools (e.g. the France case of moves towards closer governance between Catholic schools and public sector ones outlined in Pons et al., 2014) through networking, partnership and joint professional development. Network governance and different forms of school-to-school support can provide a model of innovation particularly in centralised and weak-school autonomy systems.
- (2) More integration between instruction and education through an expansion of teachers' tasks, to include care and school improvement. It implies a change in the national contract of teachers that is a political decision and vital to allow for deep pedagogical transformation.
- (3) The educator or school counsellor can play the role of a strategic resource to support a culture of care and facilitate teachers' efforts to personalise education in both VET and other types of schools and systems.
- (4) The importance of reinforcing leadership in State-run organisations to support organisational autonomy, formulate locally relevant school policies and propose learning and care as

- organisational visions.
- (5) The necessity to introduce a policy of personalisation as a universal strategy at the national level that is well-communicated and supported in both pedagogical and financial terms.

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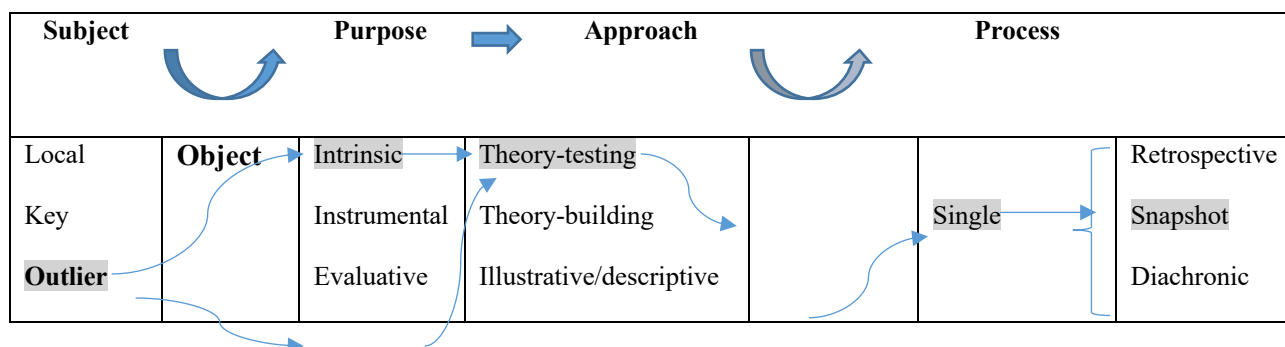
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		Explorative		Methodological Choices	Multiple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nested Parallel Sequential
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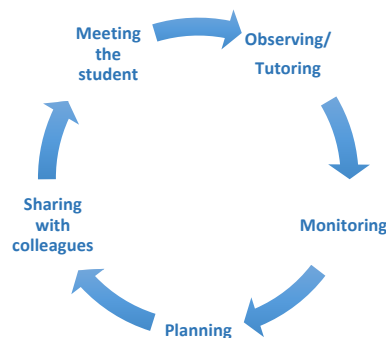
[Table 1]

Observation protocol	Tutor interview protocol
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Curriculum content: students are given choice, topics are varied, a link exists with the practical dimension (a critical aspect in the VET system) (2) Learning strategies: direct instructions (structure, types of questions); differentiated instruction (among peers divided into heterogeneous/homogeneous groups, other forms of differentiation) (3) Evaluation: oral/written/among peers/self-evaluation (4) Individual/common objectives (5) Meta-cognition forms (6) Behavioural/motivational system (7) Learning environment and use (8) Lesson structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor activity • A typical day • The relationship with families • The relationship with teachers • Behaviour management and the educational dimension • Available tools (e.g. portfolio, minutes)

[Table 2]

Activities	Actors involved	Type of information collected
Talks/preliminary interviews (2)	Tutor coordinator	Institutional background
Classroom observations (6)	Students and teachers	Practical and learning observations
Semi-structured interviews (3)	Teachers	Perceptions and customised practices
Classroom observations (4 + 2: organisation of students attending textile courses; indications contained in the internship reports)	Students and teachers	Practical and learning observations
Semi-structured interviews (9)	Tutors	Perceptions and customised practices
Participation in job rotation meetings	3 Tutors	Internal activities organisation
Semi-structured interviews (3) Focus groups with tutors	Tutor coordinator and school management	Organisational aspects concerning tutoring; perceptions and customised practices

[Table 3]



[Figure 1]

Methodology					
Teamwork	Weekly Meetings	Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student observation in the classroom and during free time. - Meetings with students, families, high school, and social services. - Teamwork and meeting minutes. 	Daily Interaction	Teamwork
		Supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Case study presentation (one or more students) every two weeks. - Standard templates for drawing up a report; questions and proposed planning. 		
		Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing with teaching staff. - Coordination or management of personalised or individualised projects, including workshops and internships. 		
		Assessment	Project assessment and re-planning based on observation.		

[Table 4]