

THE VOICE OF TEACHERS INVOLVED IN SCHOOL-WORK ALTERNANCE PROGRAMMES

*Concetta Tino (University of Padua)**

ABSTRACT: Data from Censis 2011 highlighted worrying aspects of school dropouts (18%) and a NEET population increase (22.1%); the same elements were also highlighted by data from Cedefop (2014), where the issue of youth unemployment (21.7%) was also mentioned. In addition to this are the disappointing results from OCSE-Pisa surveys demonstrating that Italian educational institutions fail to provide young people with the skills they need to effectively solve real-life problems. In this scenario, at an Italian and European level, the importance of solving these problems is repeatedly underlined, with the creation of instruments to interconnect the world of education and the world of work. Within this process, School-Work Alternance (SWA) programmes can find a place. This study focuses on the strategic action of their key actors in creating effective partnerships with external organizations. Based on this assumption, the research question asked was: what specific functions do teachers play within School-Work Alternance programmes? *Methodology:* a qualitative methodological approach was used; data were collected through semi-structured interviews addressed to 14 high school teachers, and subsequently analysed using Atlas.ti software in order to record the significant core categories that emerged. *Results:* the data collected showed that within the SWA system yet to be defined, SWA teacher/tutors and coordinators in school contexts have played a significant role within School-Work Alternance programmes to date. *Final remarks:* teachers involved in School-Work Alternance programmes have a strategic position. These results have some practical implications at both educational/training and professional levels.

KEYWORDS: school-work alternance programmes, activity theory, boundary crossers, boundary objects, training.

1. Introduction

The Italian and European debate on the importance of creating tools to integrate formal knowledge with informal learning developed in working environments is closely linked to the ongoing economic and social transformations that have been affecting Europe over the last ten years, and to the challenges they have generated. After the worrying results recorded in Italy by Censis (2011) regarding school dropouts (18%) and the increase in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) population, with a percentage of 22.1% among young people aged between 15 and 29; subsequently, Cedefop (2014) showed how, as well as the dropout (17%) and NEET populations (18–24 years: 29.3%), there was a considerable youth unemployment rate

* Concetta Tino, PhD, Post-doc fellow in Education, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology - FISPPA, University of Padua, Italy. Email: concetta.tino@unipd.it.

of 21.7%, compared to the average of 15.1% in the European Union countries. The results of the OCSE-Pisa (INVALSI 2012) surveys also contributed to reinforcing reflection on the importance of re-thinking the education-work relationship, developing methodologies and strategic learning practices that would be useful to integrate formal and informal learning, and theoretical and practical knowledge. The surveys demonstrated that Italian education institutions not only work differently in relation to the territory they belong to, and the type of school (high school, technical or vocational), they also fail to create those conditions that can help young people acquire skills that are useful for real life. This is a scenario that casts doubt on both the isolation and self-centrality of educational institutions and traditional teaching methods which have been dominated by a teacher-centred approach and the subject of study, thus denying students an active role in the process of building knowledge (Tacconi 2015a), as well as the opportunity to exercise power within participatory and active learning contexts (Fedeli 2016). Therefore, an epochal change is needed to create synergic alliances both within the formal contexts of education, with the teacher as facilitator and the learner as responsible for and co-constructor of his own personalized teaching plan (Pastore 2016), and between public and private organizations that can facilitate the relationship between education and work, to create open systems and inter-organizational agreements to cope with the challenges that “liquid modernity” generates (Bauman 2000).

The education-work relationship «[...] questions the historical, and evident institutional difference between the tasks of schools (education only) and the production world (work only), and strongly urges to redefine both the unitary identity profile of this segment of the education and training system (education and, or even through, work), and the human and educational value of production contexts (work and education)» (Tacconi 2015b: 9). From this perspective, a School-Work Alternance (SWA) programme, as a unitary synthesis of the two worlds kept separated for too long, can develop a fresh and more complete way of looking at work, not simply as a professional training tool, but also as personal development. Consequently, SWA probes the internal organizational of the education system, the teaching methods, the role of learners and teachers, but above all it leads to a questioning of the functions carried out by those key teachers who, over the years, and before the recent norm (L. 107/2015), have actively supported the development of SWA pathways and the building of bridges between formal and informal learning contexts, trying to provide students with SWA experiences based as far as possible on the idea of situated learning practice and a strategic partnership between educational and production contexts (Tino, Fedeli 2015).

2. Theoretical framework

School-Work is a system which, to be effective, needs to be built on a strong partnership between schools and workplaces, where the key actors must leave their comfort zones, cross the boundaries of their systems, and enter unfamiliar territory. In this assumption, the role performed by key teachers (tutors and SWA coordinators) during SWA paths is investigated in this study through the «boundary crossing» approach (Engeström, Engeström, Kärkkäinen 1995), whose roots lie within the cultural-historical activity theory of the «third generation» (CHAT) (Engeström 2001). According to this theory, interaction between systems can generate expansive learning through a cycle of collective transformation, when the systems partners act with awareness of the functioning of the organizations involved, considering them as goal-oriented activity systems; as multi-voiced communities inhabited by subjects with different stories, values and cultures, and where division of labour demands processes of explication and negotiation; as organisms with their historicity made from tools, rules and artefacts; as places where differences and contradictions can create conflicts and lack of equilibrium, while at the same time these factors can become sources of innovation, transformation, and learning for the people and systems involved.

The relationship between different systems, required by today's economic and social complexity, recalls the concept of boundaries, since the systems and the people who live within them, in order to overcome their specific specialization and the difficulty of dealing with problems, reach out through social and cultural practices, and through participation and collaboration within different contexts and organizations (Akkerman, Admiraal, Simons 2012; Daniels, Edwards, Engeström, Gallagher, Ludvigsen 2010), in an attempt to transcend the fragmentation (Hermans, Hermans-Konopka 2010),

Within the school-work relationship, the boundary between the two systems of activity is represented by cultural difference and the potential difficulty of interacting. However, this same difficulty is also what Akkerman and Bakker (2011: 139) defined as «the potential value of establishing communication and collaboration». This very process, during *boundary crossing* activities, involves two important components: the people involved or *boundary crossers*, and the artefacts or *boundary objects*, built to realize the process itself. In SWA paths, teacher/tutors and SWA coordinators act as 'crossers' between systems, with the task of creating bridges between the two worlds as well as the contextual connections. This leads them to experience the natural ambiguity that the role implies: on the one hand they can appear as builders of bridges and alliances between the two worlds,

capable of introducing new elements within the practices of the two different contexts (Wenger 1998); on the other, they may risk being seen as peripheral figures (Akkerman, Bakker 2011). Managing this ambiguity requires them to create dialogues with all the actors in the two contexts, to understand the different perspectives, and to develop *boundary crosser leadership* (Morse 2010).

A *boundary crossing* process is not only determined by the ability of the people directly involved in moving to unfamiliar boundaries, but above all by the ability of the system to look at and venture beyond its boundaries, to negotiate within a third space characterized by a new culture as the result of a process of hybridity and dialogue (Gutierrez, Rymes, Larson 1995) between separate organizational systems.

Within a *boundary crossing* process, not only people are involved, but also important *boundary objects* as proof of a real process of negotiation and sharing between schools and workplaces. On the one hand, they represent the strength of the synthesis of two different perspectives, on the other, they are the very image of flexibility, since they are concrete artefacts of a path built jointly by groups and different contexts, in the name of a process of collaboration, communication, reciprocal learning, and simultaneous participation in different domains (school and work), according to the principle of *othering* (Akkerman, Bakker 2011: 142) based on the ability of dialogue and identification.

3. The study

3.1 Objectives and methodology

This study wished to investigate the role of teachers involved in SWA programmes, to answer the following general question: «What are the functions of teacher/tutors and coordinators in SWA programmes?» In order to identify useful guidelines to allow a more detailed data analysis, the general question was then dealt with in two specific questions: i) What are the real tasks of teacher/tutors and SWA coordinators? ii) How do SWA tutors and coordinators support school-work partnerships?

In this specific study, a qualitative approach was adopted whose peculiar aspects were: i) the ability to understand phenomena, through the frameworks by which people experience and interpret reality (Corbin, Strauss 2008); ii) the ability of the researcher to follow a flexible research design (Creswell 2013; Marshall, Rossman 2011); iii) the opportunity to look at the setting and the people as a whole, without reducing them to a mere set of variables (Tracy 2013; Yin 2011).

The survey technique used was the semi-structured interview thanks to its low level of directivity, due both to the presence of a draft on the topics to be treated and without a precise order, thus, only with the indication of a 'perimeter' to move within, and the role of the researcher in conducting the interview. This allowed the researcher to decide which topics to deal with, what sequence to follow, how to formulate the questions, but also to take a closer look at any issues emerging during the interview. In turn, interviewees were left free to express their opinions and ideas, indirectly influencing the communication flow and direction of the interview. In this sense, through the semi-structured interview, the interviewer and the interviewee had similar roles (Sala 2010).

The interview addressed to the key SWA actors included seven dimensions (teachers' functions, relationship with partners, students' learning design, SWA programme implementation, learning, assessment, ideas for SWA improvement), each of them dealt with in questions, with the aim of gathering the necessary information on the various aspects relating to the research goal, but without giving up the flexibility and openness required by the type of interview and the characteristics of conversation.

3.2 Context and participants

The context of the study was seven high schools in the north of Italy. Specifically, it involved four technical institutions, one vocational institution, and two high schools. The teachers involved numbered 14, one teacher/tutor and one SWA coordinator for each educational institution. Both had some SWA experience: this meant that the teacher/tutors had experience in supporting students on SWA paths within production contexts; while SWA coordinators were teachers with an overview of the design and practice of SWAs at the institution they belonged to.

3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were carried out between May and December 2015 at the various educational institutions involved, where the teachers worked, and after approval of their school principals. After receiving the participants' authorization, each one-and-a-half-hour interview was recorded. Subsequently, all interviews were transferred to an electronic format to allow the researcher a textual analysis using Atlas.ti.07 software. The analysis procedure mainly followed the *top-down* principle, a deductive approach where the content analysis was based on theoretical reference categories, but neither the *bottom-up*

or inductive approach were excluded when emerging and useful categories had been identified to better understand the object of study.

The analyses conducted through Atlas.ti.07 generated 14 *Primary Documents (PD)* and 549 codes, and included: a) transcription of the interviews in digital format (*PD*); b) preparation of the *Hermeneutic Unit (HU)* as a setting for pre-codes and codes for groups-families and networks; c) identification of the quotations with the definition of labels by function: *add coding* and *open coding*; d) identification of the code families around which to group those codes that could better describe a macro-area or a *core category* (Tarozzi 2008); e) graphic representation of the most significant family *networks*. This last process proved useful as a summary map of the relevant categories identified or emerged.

3.4 Findings

Analysis of the interviews, carried out as described in the previous paragraph, produced significant findings on the object of study. The findings have been presented here as cross-themes on the two specific questions the general research question was split into.

As regards the first specific question, «What are the real tasks of teacher/tutors and SWA coordinators?» five cross-themes emerged:

- i) *the concrete development of the school-work partnership*: SWA tutors and coordinators are the only teachers who constantly interface with representatives of production contexts. The possibility of maintaining or strengthening strategic and long-lasting partnerships with external contexts depends on their ability to emphasize the importance of the SWA projects, and to combine the needs of schools with those of external organizational contexts, developing reliable relationships in the name of dialogue, transparency, and mutual respect;
- ii) *the appropriate student-production context matching*: in fact, this was considered a key factor by the participants; the effectiveness of the entire SWA experience had by the students depended on this. In order to avoid possible mistakes, it is necessary for SWA tutors and coordinators to know both the interests and potentiality of the students and the work contexts, in terms of professional and relationship practices;
- iii) *the organization of students' SWA experiences*; if as a first step, the SWA coordinators have the task of identifying a teacher/tutor for each class or group of students, providing them with the characteristics of external organizations that host students, in a second step, the teacher/tutors, after identifying the students' interests, analysing and excluding logistical problems, have the task of contacting the

- working contexts where they can place the students, negotiating the period and, if possible, the activities the students should do;
- iv) *preparation of the documents that must support and provide proof of the student's experience*: there are many school contexts where the SWA tutors and coordinators are involved in preparing the necessary documents: students' training design, assessment and monitoring tools, and observation grids. These are *boundary objects* or *mediating artefacts*, which should provide proof of the process of sharing and dialogue between systems, the synthesis of different perspectives and not the fruit of activities carried out by individuals or at most by very few people without any form of internal or external sharing;
 - v) *the monitoring and assessment of experiences*: tutors and coordinators are also in charge of this complex task. They monitor the experience of every single student under their care, through periodic visits to the host organizations and informal conversations with workplace tutors, by collecting and analysing student logs, when the school requests them; by reading and assessing the student's final SWA report; by preparing an assessment report of students' SWA experience in order to present it to the class committee. This is an organism which, in most cases, can only take note of the assessment process, without playing an active role, because of its minimal participation within the whole SWA process.

The themes relating to the second specific question «How do SWA tutors and coordinators support school-work partnerships?» are two:

- i) *the internal and external communication that SWA tutors and coordinators use as 'glue' between the two contexts*. Participants stated how, within the institution they belong to, communication is useful not only to promote the sharing process, to motivate, and involve other colleagues in taking part first in the building of students' learning design, then in the experience itself, but also as a tool for translating and filtering information; while, on the outside, communication becomes the lubricant of the partnership, since it generates trust and good relations between the parties, and facilitates the sharing of various perspectives;
- ii) *the effort to combine different perspectives*; it is precisely this theme that highlights the role of SWA tutors and coordinators as *boundary crossers* between systems. Participants showed a willingness to live within the boundary zone (Konkola, Tuomi-Gröhn, Lambert, Ludvigsen 2007), considered as a space free from predetermined rules and activities, and where a real *dialogization* process between school and work (Gutierrez *et al.* 1995: 446) could produce a synthesis of cultures and differences, generating effective learning experiences for the students and systems involved.

4. Final remarks

The findings showed how the relationship between school/work systems requires recognition of both the boundaries between organizations and the activity of boundary crossers, whose role is to create links and bridges between different organizational systems (Aldrich, Herker 1977; Andersson, Andersson 2008), the willingness to inhabit that third space (Frenkel 2008; Gutierrez *et al.* 1995) creatively generating a synthesis of distinct cultures and perspectives. The core elements that emerged showed that SWA tutors and coordinators act as an important cross-system function between systems. In fact, they are those who, together with the students, carry the image of the school they belong to outside; they connect students with local production contexts, and create links between school life and working contexts, attempting to reduce the distance between them, seeking to link content and methods to the needs of the outside environment. They are those teachers who have a clear awareness of the value of the experience and therefore declare themselves ready to sacrifice time and resources to accomplish it. They are the only teachers who are committed to navigating internal and external boundaries, involved in the communicative flows of negotiation and dialogue, influencing the effectiveness of internal and external partnerships, and student SWA experiences. They are the only teachers who work concretely and consistently in the construction of new crossing artefacts as evidence of a possible boundary-crossing process.

The findings highlighted another element on which the educational and work contexts are presumed to reflect: only tutors and coordinators are the 'protagonist-managers' of an SWA system; in fact, they are supporters and promoters of partnerships, organizers and responsible for students' experiences, managers of internal and external communication flows, builders of *boundary objects*, and responsible for SWA experience assessments. All of this means that the two systems are still trapped within their boundaries, struggling to creatively live a third common space, as a common place of innovation, transformation, and mutual learning, as a possibility for change that requires new relationships and new cultures (Akkermann, Bruining 2016).

This scenario has some important implications in practice: SWA is an educational methodology that became mandatory for all study paths and for all students with the introduction of the Italian Law no. 107 of 2015, so that tutors and coordinators, who have been SWA path managers and policy makers so far are required to reflect and gain awareness of the presence of boundary crossing processes in SWA pathways. It demands the full involvement of parties rather than individuals. At the same time, it cannot be denied that tutors and coordinators play a key role within this process and that they should

be formally recognized a new professionalism that can be identified as the figure of an educational middle-management system (Fabbri, Melacarne, Allodola 2015). Additionally, the complexity of the functions given to them implies the recognition of the role of *boundary crossers*, and hence the need to think about appropriate educational and training paths capable of supporting these new professionals in the processes of integrating the objectives of different organizations, in the crossing of different boundaries that require them to know how to enact a dual professional identity (Richter, West, Van Dick, Dawson 2006) and how to enact their boundary crosser leadership in order to promote the overall involvement of systems.

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