# Teachers' Professional Skills and Competencies:
# What Are the Most Important?

## Sofia Cramerotti[1]

University of Verona - Department of Human Sciences, Italy[1]

## Abstract

*The aim of this research is to investigate teachers' professional skills and competencies through a self-reflection and self-evaluation approach using a framework-syllabus developed inside a specific multi-professional research project. To favour the construction of a high-quality framework for this study, a heterogeneous team of 15 users with complementary competencies was involved in the development (educational researchers, school principals-head teachers, teachers of all grades) of a framework based on Italian and international professional standards. In this work I present the preliminary result of a pilot study that has investigated the perception of importance of a group of practitioners referring to the framework-syllabus of skills and competencies that each "expert teacher" should master in order to meet the requirements of the teaching profession. To do this, I grouped the most relevant competencies in an online syllabus framework-tool. It was structured in 3 macro-areas (professional, teaching and organizing) and 16 competencies expressed in 77 different behavioural indicators (how demonstrate the indicator in her/his practice). The teachers' opinion on professional competencies were investigated through a self-reflection and self-evaluation/assessment approach. The tool created for the purpose, implemented and used by the participants, was an online questionnaire. The results showed the order in importance assigned to the 16 competencies (from most important=1 to less important=16). The order illustrates the particular emphasis placed on the ethical aspects related to the profession, continuous learning/innovation, leadership role and inclusive approaches for all the students. A particular focus emerged in connection to the strategic role of relationships and collaboration; this aspect was strengthened by a specific item were the participants underlined the great importance of team work. These preliminary results indicate that professional evaluation standards provide educational evaluation knowledge that teachers can use to acquire the working experience they use in their profession.*

Keywords: *Teachers' professional development; skills; competencies; self-perception*

## 1. Introduction

Being a teacher at any level requires a significant amount not only of knowledge, but cross skills and competencies, too [1] [2] [3] [6]. Paying attention to the core competencies for teachers helps to ensure that all teachers are prepared to make school efficient and effective, reaching the standards that are recommended for being a qualified teacher [4] [6].

Teachers need to have competencies and skills necessary to create a positive classroom/school environment and work collaboratively with other stakeholders within and outside the school context in order to provide a successful support to all learners [4].

The recognition of specific standards for the teaching profession based on characterizing skills is a necessary process in order to foster a school vision in accordance with the change that school is experiencing [2] [5] [6].

In this pilot research we have examined teachers' opinion referring to a syllabus of professional skills and competencies. The syllabus is a framework that identifies and describes the skills of expert teachers in all their roles [1] [4]. It is a fundamental tool for a training process consistent with the teaching profiles, both to guide the to-become teachers entering in service, and to provide the in-service teachers with a system of self-perception and evaluation of their skills [4].

According to the national Italian standards and international literature [1] [2] [3] [5] [6] we aggregated the skills and competencies in a specific framework-syllabus. The teachers' opinion on professional skills and competencies were investigated through a self-reflection and self-evaluation approach using this framework-syllabus.

In fact, we believe that self-evaluation of their own professional competence is firstly an exercise of introspection and a helpful occasion for the teachers for deeply reflect on their professional effectiveness and practices. It is an occasion to analyse not only what a teacher has "to do", but firstly what he has "to be" for becoming an expert teacher.

Finding specific moments dedicated to self-reflection and self-evaluation is a significant part of teachers' practice. In this way it is an important need to find these specific moments in order to regularly monitor and evaluate the quality of their work and professional activities. Furthermore, teacher's self-evaluation significantly adds up to monitoring their work also for guarantee teaching quality for all the students.

Teachers can take this self-assessment to determine how they exhibit these foundational and advanced competencies and identify strengths and areas of growth [4].

The aim of these work is to present the preliminary result of a pilot study that has investigated the perception of importance of a group of practitioners referring to a framework-syllabus of skills and competencies that each "expert teacher" should master in order to full fill what the teaching profession request.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants
This pilot study involved 207 in-service Italian school teachers (Primary school=123; Secondary–first grade=51; Secondary–second grade=33). The main part of them (n=116) had a professional in-service experience from 6 to 20 years.

### 2.2 Procedures
According to the literature about professional standards presented above, we aggregated the most relevant competencies in an online tool representing a framework-syllabus.

To favour the construction of a high-quality framework to be used, a heterogeneous team of 15 users having complementary competencies was involved in its development/review (educational researchers, school principals-head teachers, teachers of all grades).

It was structured in 3 macro-areas and 16 competencies explained in 77 different behavioural indicators (how demonstrate the indicator in her/his practice):

1. *Area of professional competencies:*
   Practice professional ethic;
   Manage relationships/leadership;
   Life-long learning/continuous training/innovation;
   Problem solving;
   ICT-digital competencies;
   Use of English language (L2) as professional instrument.

2. *Area of teaching competencies:*
   Teaching-learning/didactical planning;
   Enhance talent/educational guidance;
   Organizing educational resources;
   Inclusion;
   Handle class/groups;
   Students' observation/assessment;
   Evaluate the effectiveness of didactical interventions

3. *Area of organizing competencies:*
   Collaboration/team working;
   Design/evaluate the school participation-system improvement;
   Handle/accompanying school's change.

In order to give a more useful representation, the competencies were assigned and aggregated into four different profiles of "expert teacher":

1. Innovative and inclusive teaching;
2. School organization: integrated learning environments and processes for quality improvement;
3. Continuing professional development;
4. Guidance in education, training and relationships between school and society.

In each profile the competencies have been "weighed" in different way, according to the importance in relationship to the different profiles.

At the end of the self-evaluation through the online tool, the user receives as output, a percentage of correspondence between the grade of competencies declared (self-perception) and the grade expected for each different profile. The results are also showed with a graphical view of the single 16 competencies ("radar chart" and/or histogram).

## 2.3 Data collection and analysis

The teachers' opinion on professional competencies were investigated through a self-reflection and self-evaluation/assessment approach. The tool created for the purpose, implemented and used by the participants was an online questionnaire structured in 77 different items/behaviours referring to the 16 competencies.

Each item was self-evaluated through a frequency scale Likert-type based on 5-degree where participants should choose/assigning a rating from 1=never to 1=always.

In the present state of the research we have collected and analysed some quantitative data (calculation of the percentage in terms of frequency).

## 3. Results and conclusions

The results showed that teachers recognized themselves in Profile 1 (60%), the one that is most referred to education and innovation in teaching-learning processes. In this way it is interest to report the order of importance given to the 16 competencies (from most important=1 to less important=16)

1. Practice professional ethic
2. Life-long learning/innovation
3. Manage relationships/leadership
4. Inclusion
5. Collaboration/team working
6. Problem solving
7. Handle class/groups
8. Enhance talent/educational guidance
9. Teaching-learning/didactical planning
10. Organizing educational resources
11. Evaluate the effectiveness of actions and didactical interventions
12. Design/evaluate the school's system improvement
13. Students' observation/assessment
14. Handle/accompanying school's change
15. ICT-digital competencies
16. Use of English language (L2).

This order illustrates the particular emphasis given to ethic aspects related to profession, continuous learning/innovation, leadership role and inclusive approach for all the students.

A particular focus emerged referring to the strategic role of relationships and collaboration; this aspect was strengthened by a specific item were the participants underlined the extremely importance of team working (62%).

Referring specifically to the online tool usability, the participants found clear (35%) and extremely clear (28%) the comprehensibility of items and the graphic-results representation (clear 26%; extremely clear 35%).

The completeness of competencies was evaluated representative (32%) and very representative (36%), the same for the behavioural indicators (representative 35%; very representative 36%).

These preliminary results indicate that professional evaluation standards provide educational evaluation knowledge that teachers can use to acquire the working experience they use in their profession. It is fundamental that teachers conduct self-evaluations and use the results for reflecting on their daily teaching practice.

In the future, we hope that the competencies development for the teacher could evolve in competencies for the whole school staff. In this perspective, the school will therefor benefit from a solid team, in which the skills of the various profiles are all properly developed and well represented.

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