

Professional reflexivity in Italian initial teacher education: the Coordinating Tutor as an epistemic guide

Valentina Della Volpe
University of Roma Tre, Italy

Abstract

This study investigates the role of the coordinating tutor as an epistemic guide to professional reflexivity within Italian initial teacher education pathways (PEF) established by the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) of 4 August 2023. Particular attention is devoted to indirect internship modules, which constitute a central component of teacher preparation and, in some pathways, the primary context for professional reflection and development.

Drawing on an exploratory theory-informed research design, the study involved 65 student teachers enrolled in two secondary-school subject areas (A012 and A022) at Roma Tre University during the 2024/2025 academic year. The research conceptualizes tutorial action through four interconnected dimensions: epistemic, reflective, relational, and design-oriented. Building on the theoretical frameworks of reflective mentorship, guidance-oriented education, and the European LifeComp framework, tutorial mediation is interpreted as an intentional and structured process capable of transforming experience into professional knowledge.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and participant observation. Findings indicate a significant contribution of tutorial mediation to the development of professional reflexivity, the redefinition of professional identity, and the strengthening of guidance-oriented instructional design competences. Qualitative evidence further suggests that reflexivity should not be understood as an automatic outcome of teaching experience but rather as the result of intentional educational mediation.

The study argues that the coordinating tutor plays a strategic role in bridging theory and practice, acting as the architect of a generative educational ecosystem that supports reflective and professionally informed teacher development.

Key Word: *Professional Reflexivity; Coordinating Tutor; Epistemic Guidance; Initial Teacher Education; Reflective Mentorship.*

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I. Introduction

The Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of 4 August 2023 substantially reshaped the architecture of Italian initial teacher education for lower and upper secondary school teachers, introducing university-based qualification pathways (PEF) structured around three distinct formats: 60, 36, and 30 ECTS credits. These pathways differ in terms of workload, internship structure, and target participants, yet they share a common objective: the development of a reflective, relational, and guidance-oriented teaching professionalism, as outlined in the final profile described in Annex A of the decree.

At the core of this educational architecture lies the internship, in both its direct and indirect forms, conceived as a privileged space for integrating theoretical knowledge with pedagogical, didactic, and relational competences. Within the framework of Italian teacher education reform, the figure of the coordinating tutor—regulated by Article 10 of the DPCM—is entrusted with specific responsibilities: organizing and conducting indirect practicum activities, supervising and assessing the internship process, and guiding the development of the professional e-portfolio.

Despite the central role assigned by recent Italian legislation to the coordinating tutor, the scholarly literature remains limited in its analysis of the pedagogical functions performed by this professional figure within the new qualification pathways. In particular, little attention has been devoted to understanding how tutorial mediation contributes to the development of professional reflexivity and teacher identity across the different pathway structures established by the DPCM of 4 August 2023.

This article proposes a reinterpretation of these responsibilities through a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes the coordinating tutor as an epistemic guide to professional reflexivity. From this perspective, the tutor acts as an educational agent capable of transforming experience—whether derived from prior professional

practice or from internship activities—into conscious professional knowledge through intentional, structured, and pedagogically grounded accompaniment.

The study was conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year at Roma Tre University within the PEF 30, PEF 36, and PEF 60 qualification pathways established by the Italian initial teacher education system. Participants were enrolled in two secondary-school subject areas: A012 (Italian Language and Literature in Upper Secondary Education) and A022 (Italian, History, and Geography in Lower Secondary Education). The overall sample comprised 65 student teachers: 40 enrolled in the PEF30 pathway, 7 in the PEF36 pathway, and 18 in the PEF60 pathway.

The study is guided by three research questions:

How can tutorial action be conceptualized as a form of professional accompaniment capable of fostering deep professional reflexivity among student teachers?

Which dimensions of tutorial mediation are most influential in the development of teacher professional identity?

What empirical evidence supports the educational effectiveness of the coordinating tutor as the architect of a reflective and guidance-oriented educational ecosystem?

II. Teacher qualification pathways: regulatory structure and the role of the indirect practicum

The Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM) of 4 August 2023, implementing Articles 2-bis and 2-ter of Legislative Decree 59/2017, establishes three Italian teacher qualification pathways differentiated according to workload, practicum structure, and participant profile. The 60 ECTS pathway (Annex 1) is designed for graduates who are neither qualified teachers nor currently employed in schools. It includes 15 ECTS credits of direct practicum and 5 ECTS credits of indirect practicum (IP). The 36 ECTS pathway (Annex 5), intended for successful candidates in public recruitment examinations who had previously acquired 24 ECTS credits by 31 October 2022, includes 10 ECTS credits of direct practicum and 3 ECTS credits of indirect practicum. The 30 ECTS pathway (Annex 2), reserved for teachers already qualified in another subject area or educational level, as well as for teachers employed on fixed-term contracts, includes exclusively 9 ECTS credits of indirect practicum and no direct practicum, in recognition of the professional experience already acquired by participants. Table 1 summarizes the main structural differences among the three pathways. Table no 1 summarizes the main structural differences among the three pathways.

Table no 1: Comparative structure of the Italian PEF teacher qualification pathways established by the DPCM of 4 August 2023

Pathway	Total ECTS	Direct Practicum	Indirect Practicum	Participants
PEF 60 ECTS (Art. 2-bis, Legislative Decree 59/2017)	60	15 ECTS	5 ECTS	Graduates without teaching qualification or professional service (n = 18)
PEF 36 ECTS (Art. 18-bis, para. 1)	36	10 ECTS	3 ECTS	Successful candidates holding 24 ECTS credits acquired before 2022 (n = 7)
PEF 30 ECTS (Art. 13, para. 2)	30	None	9 ECTS	Teachers already qualified in another subject area or educational level, or employed on fixed-term contracts (n = 40)

This regulatory distinction generates different configurations of tutorial mediation and assigns a variable educational weight to the coordinating tutor across the three pathways. For PEF60 and PEF36 participants, the indirect practicum represents a space for interpreting, analysing, and conceptualising ongoing school-based experiences. In this context, the coordinating tutor supports the critical re-elaboration of what student teachers observe and experience in classrooms. For PEF30 participants, who are typically teachers with several years of professional experience, the indirect practicum constitutes the only institutional training component of the pathway. Here, the coordinating tutor becomes the primary educational reference for the interpretation and critical re-examination of professional experience that is already well established but only rarely questioned through a theoretically informed lens.

The DPCM further specifies the aims of the indirect practicum. It consists of autonomous and guided reflection, documentation, and in-depth analysis aimed at reinterpreting educational activities through dialogue with peers, tutors, and university instructors, while simultaneously supporting the development of comprehensive documentation of the learning pathway in the form of a professional portfolio (Annex 2, DPCM

2023). Article 10 assigns the coordinating tutor responsibility for this educational coordination, as well as for the supervision and assessment of the entire practicum process. The same article also stipulates that university Teaching and Learning Centers (TLCs) may administer evaluation questionnaires concerning the practicum experience. The results of these evaluations may be used in decisions regarding tutor reappointment and must be made publicly available. The empirical investigation presented in this study is grounded in this regulatory framework.

III. Theoretical framework: reflective mentorship, epistemic guidance, and guidance-oriented education

The concept of the reflective practitioner developed by Schön (1983) constitutes the theoretical foundation of the present study. Schön distinguishes between reflection-in-action, the ability to reflect while acting, and reflection-on-action, namely the retrospective examination of lived experience. Within the context of the indirect practicum (IP), the coordinating tutor operates simultaneously on both levels: reflecting on their own tutorial practice while enacting it and guiding student teachers through a comparable process in relation to their own teaching practice, whether ongoing or previously acquired.

Mezirow (1991) further develops this perspective through the theory of transformative learning, which identifies critical reflection on assumptions as the mechanism through which adult learners reconstruct their frames of reference. For PEF30 participants, who are experienced teachers with several years of professional service, this process assumes a distinctive character: it involves questioning established practices through theoretical categories and identifying the implicit assumptions embedded within professional routines that deserve critical examination. For PEF60 and PEF36 participants, by contrast, reflection is intertwined with ongoing direct practicum experiences, fostering a form of professional awareness that is progressively constructed through experience and reflection.

Korthagen (2001), through the ALACT model (*Action, Looking Back, Awareness, Creating Alternative Methods of Action, Trial*), provides an operational framework for structuring reflection within practicum settings. From this perspective, the coordinating tutor does not merely observe student teachers' practices but actively interprets, problematizes, and recontextualizes them within a higher level of professional awareness. This is the function that the present study defines as *epistemic guidance*: a structured form of accompaniment aimed at developing the capacity to interpret one's own practice through theoretically informed lenses.

Reflective mentorship differs from traditional forms of tutorship because of its transformative orientation. Rather than transmitting predefined models of effective teaching, the mentor co-constructs with the mentee a process of inquiry into practice (Hobson et al., 2009). Within the Italian PEF qualification pathways, this dimension must be calibrated according to the differing profiles of participants. For PEF30 teachers, it requires the ability to value prior professional experience without allowing it to become rigid or unquestioned. For PEF60 and PEF36 participants, it involves supporting a professional identity that is still under construction.

While professional reflexivity is assumed as the central construct of the present study, tutorial mediation is situated within a broader guidance-oriented perspective explicitly promoted by the DPCM of 4 August 2023. The reflective dimension is therefore intertwined with a guidance-oriented one. The DPCM explicitly includes among the competences expected of qualified teachers the ability to implement "guidance-oriented teaching aimed at developing the resources possessed by each and every student and encouraging the construction of a positive self-image and life project" (Annex A, Section 3, Letter e). This provision is consistent with contemporary theories of educational guidance and orientation.

Batini and Del Sarto (2005) propose a narrative approach to guidance based on the capacity to reinterpret one's personal history and build connections between lived experience and future-oriented intentionality. Silvaggi (2022) conceptualizes guidance as a cultural practice capable of activating processes of meaning-making and subjectivity construction. Di Fabio (2017, 2023) expands this paradigm through the construct of *positive self and relational management*. Soresi and Nota (2020) describe an identity continuum extending from *homo economicus* to *homo prospectus*, placing ethical projectuality at the centre of educational guidance. Finally, the European LifeComp framework (European Commission, 2020) provides the overarching European reference framework, articulating nine competences across the personal, social, and learning-to-learn domains. Table no 2 summarizes the principal theoretical and regulatory references adopted in the present study

Table no 2: Theoretical and regulatory frameworks underpinning the study.

	Conception of Guidance	Pedagogical Focus	Strategic Actions	Educational Purposes
LifeComp (EU, 2020)	Personal, social, and metacognitive competences	Lifelong learning and active citizenship	Nine key competences across three domains	LifeComp (EU, 2020)
Ministerial Decree	Continuous	Self-awareness,	Interdisciplinary	Ministerial Decree

328/2022	process integrated across the curriculum	contextual understanding, and life planning	modules, teacher-tutor, e-portfolio, UNICA platform	328/2022
DPCM of 4 August 2023	Practicum as a reflective and guidance-oriented space	Integration of theory and practice; professional identity	Coordinating tutor, indirect practicum, professional e-portfolio	DPCM of 4 August 2023
Reflective Mentorship (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1991; Korthagen, 2001)	Intentional accompaniment in the construction of professional knowledge	Deep reflexivity, metacognition, and professional narrative	Socratic dialogue, reflective writing, circle time	Reflective teachers capable of accompanying and guiding others

IV. Methodology

The study is configured as an exploratory theory-informed investigation with an applied orientation (Mortari, 2007), conducted through an embedded mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data collected through a structured questionnaire provide a broad mapping of participants' evaluations of tutorial mediation, while qualitative data derived from participant observation offer an interpretative understanding of the reflective processes activated throughout the educational experience.

The purposive sample consisted of 65 student teachers enrolled in the A012 and A022 subject areas at Roma Tre University during the 2024/2025 academic year: 40 participants were enrolled in the PEF30 pathway, 7 in the PEF36 pathway, and 18 in the PEF60 pathway. The three groups differed not only in terms of the qualification pathway attended but also with regard to their professional and biographical profiles. PEF30 participants were experienced teachers who did not undertake a direct practicum. PEF36 participants were successful candidates in public recruitment examinations who combined the indirect practicum with direct practicum activities carried out in partner schools. PEF60 participants were recent graduates experiencing their first structured contact with school settings and completed the indirect practicum alongside the direct practicum.

Tutorial action was designed and implemented by the same coordinating tutor across all three groups according to a model structured around four interconnected dimensions, consistent with the institutional responsibilities defined by Article 10 of the DPCM and with the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3. The coincidence of the roles of coordinating tutor and researcher represents a limitation of the study, as it may have introduced elements of social desirability into participants' responses and influenced the qualitative interpretation of the data. Consequently, findings should be interpreted from an exploratory perspective.

The epistemic dimension, corresponding to the tutor's role as an epistemic guide, focused on transforming professional experience into an object of theoretically grounded reflection. Through Socratic dialogue and guided problematization, participants were encouraged to critically examine their representations of the teaching profession. For PEF30 participants, this involved questioning practices consolidated through years of teaching experience. For PEF60 and PEF36 participants, it involved constructing interpretative categories through which to understand their initial school-based experiences.

The reflective dimension was operationalized through the systematic use of reflective writing activities and structured circle-time sessions in which participants verbalized learning outcomes, difficulties, and subsequent re-design processes. These moments were not conceived as simple feedback activities but as fully educational practices in which professional narrative assumed an identity-building function.

The relational dimension emphasized the quality of the tutorial relationship as a determining factor in professional learning (Hobson et al., 2009). The coordinating tutor acted as a facilitator of meaning-making, fostering a climate of trust in which participants felt legitimized to express doubts, uncertainties, and professional aspirations.

The design-oriented dimension was expressed through guidance in the construction of transferable guidance-oriented learning units designed according to the principles of backward design (Ziegenfuss & LeMire, 2019) and inspired by the service-learning paradigm (Colazzo et al., 2018). Within the workshop Inner Journeys and Life Choices: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as Guidance Models, participants developed an educational module intended for implementation in their current or future teaching contexts.

Empirical data collection relied on two principal instruments. The first was a structured Likert-scale questionnaire (1–5: Not at All, Slightly, Moderately, Very Much, Extremely) administered to all 65 participants at the conclusion of the indirect practicum. The questionnaire was organized into sections concerning content, methodologies, organizational aspects, the coordinating tutor, and educational outcomes. It consisted of 30 items grouped into five thematic sections, together with three final open-ended questions. The questionnaire was used to explore participants' perceptions of the four dimensions of tutorial mediation and of the educational outcomes attributed to the indirect practicum experience.

The second instrument was participant observation conducted by the coordinating tutor during workshops, cooperative dialogue sessions, and final circle-time activities. Observational data were documented

through systematic field notes and analysed using thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participant observation enabled a qualitative exploration of the reflective, identity-related, and design-oriented processes that emerged throughout the educational experience.

V. Educational outcomes: quantitative findings and qualitative interpretation

The questionnaire data relating to the Coordinating Tutor section reveal consistently high evaluations across all three groups, with response distributions concentrated at the upper end of the scale (Very Much and Extremely). Table no 3 reports the percentages of responses at the highest level (Extremely) for each item and cohort.

Table no 3: Evaluation of the Coordinating Tutor: percentage of “extremely” responses by item and cohort (n = 65)

Coordinating Tutor Items	PEF30 (n=40)	PEF36 (n=7)	PEF60 (n=18)	Total (n=65)
Knowledgeable and competent	95%	77%	94%	88%
Attentive to participants’ needs	90%	76%	94%	86%
Able to stimulate reflection	81%	73%	94%	82%
Able to generate interest and engagement	76%	73%	94%	80%
Able to manage and coordinate the group	81%	67%	94%	80%
Able to communicate clearly	76%	67%	89%	77%
Provided useful guidance and teaching materials	81%	73%	89%	80%

The item Knowledgeable and competent reached 88% of Extremely responses across the entire sample, with peaks of 95% among PEF30 participants and 94% among PEF60 participants. This finding is particularly significant from an interpretative perspective. PEF30 participants are experienced teachers who evaluate the tutor against the background of their own established professional practice, whereas PEF60 participants are recent graduates who rely extensively on tutorial guidance. In both cases, the professional credibility of the coordinating tutor is perceived as a fundamental condition for the educational legitimacy of the pathway.

The ability to stimulate reflection reached 82% overall, with the highest value recorded among PEF60 participants (94%). This item corresponds directly to the epistemic dimension of the tutorial model adopted in the study and is especially valued by PEF60 participants, for whom the tutor’s epistemic guidance represents the principal interpretative framework through which they make sense of their first school-based experiences. Attention to participants’ needs (86%) and the ability to manage and coordinate the group (80%) provide evidence of the quality of the relational dimension. PEF36 participants systematically reported lower values than the other two groups. This finding may be interpreted in light of their hybrid profile, as they simultaneously engage in direct and indirect practicum activities, distribute their attention across multiple learning contexts, and complete a smaller number of indirect practicum credits. Table no 4 presents the findings relating to the educational outcomes of the indirect practicum.

Stimulated reflection (66% Extremely) and the exchange of experiences (65%) emerged as the most highly valued outcome dimensions across the entire sample, followed by personal professional growth and the development of practical skills (both 62%). The predominance of metacognitive and identity-related aspects over purely knowledge-based outcomes suggests that participants perceived tutorial mediation primarily as a contribution to the development of professional awareness. Knowledge acquisition and the applicability of content to professional practice both reached 53%, indicating that the perceived value of the indirect practicum lies principally in its reflective rather than transmissive dimension.

Across all three groups, the competence identified as having improved the most was the ability to design and develop educational actions responsive to the needs of all learners. This option was selected by 57% of PEF30 participants, 59% of PEF36 participants, and 50% of PEF60 participants, resulting in an overall average of 55%. This convergence across cohorts with markedly different professional profiles suggests that the design-oriented dimension of tutorial mediation is perceived as a relevant educational component regardless of participants’ previous teaching experience.

Table no 4: Educational outcomes of the indirect practicum: percentage of “Extremely” responses by dimension and cohort (n = 65)

Outcome Dimension (% Extremely)	PEF30 (n=40)	PEF36 (n=7)	PEF60 (n=18)	Totale (n=65)
Reflections stimulated	71%	60%	67%	66%
Exchange of experiences	71%	57%	67%	65%
Personal professional	67%	50%	72%	62%

growth				
Development of practical/professional skills	71%	43%	72%	62%
Applicability of content to professional practice	48%	45%	67%	53%
Knowledge acquired	62%	33%	67%	53%
Most improved competence: designing learning units responsive to all learners' educational needs	57%	59%	50%	55%

The thematic analysis of qualitative observations provides a deeper understanding of the processes of identity transformation activated throughout the experience. Three themes emerged with particular frequency. The first concerns the re-signification of the teaching role. Many participants described a shift in their perception of educational work, moving from a transmissive conception of teaching towards a relational and guidance-oriented one. Statements such as *"I now see the teacher as someone who accompanies learners"* and *"I have realized that guiding students requires listening, not only subject-matter expertise"* appeared consistently across all three groups.

The second theme concerns the value of the educational climate. Participants explicitly recognized the quality of the tutorial relationship as a prerequisite for the development of reflexivity itself. Comments included observations such as *"the classroom climate was always relaxed and collaborative, and the tutor was consistently attentive and supportive"*, *"a tutor's preparation and passion for teaching are fundamental"*, and *"during the indirect practicum I found the tutor's teaching approach constructive and meaningful."*

The third theme concerns the demand for continuity. The most recurrent criticism emerging from participants' observations did not concern the quality of tutorial mediation but rather its limited duration. Participants from all three pathways expressed the need for longer timeframes and for a greater number of laboratory-based and experiential activities. Within the theoretical perspective adopted in this study, this finding may be interpreted positively: once activated, reflexivity generates a desire for further exploration and deeper professional inquiry.

VI. Discussion

The findings converge in outlining a profile of tutorial mediation that extends beyond, while remaining consistent with, the organizational functions defined by Article 10 of the DPCM. The coordinating tutor appears to perform four fundamental functions.

The first is the function of epistemic guidance, which consists of transforming professional experience into structured knowledge by activating processes of problematization and theorization grounded in practice (Schön, 1983). This function manifests itself differently across the three pathways. For PEF30 participants, it takes the form of a critical re-signification of established professional practices; for PEF60 and PEF36 participants, it involves the progressive construction of interpretative categories through which direct practicum experiences can be understood and analysed. The high evaluation of the item "able to stimulate reflection" (82% overall; 94% among PEF60 participants) provides empirical support for this function.

The second is the transformative function, which activates processes of restructuring meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991), facilitating the transition from an implicit teaching identity to a reflective form of professional awareness. Personal professional growth (62% Extremely) and stimulated reflection (66%) provide quantitative evidence of this function, while the qualitative narratives reveal its depth in terms of identity development and professional self-understanding.

The third is the guidance-oriented function, which consists of embodying the guidance-oriented teaching competences envisaged in Annex A of the DPCM and thereby serving as a model for participants. The indirect practicum thus becomes a space in which future and practicing teachers not only learn how to guide their students but also experience firsthand the transformative value of educational guidance. The use of narrative and reflective methodologies, together with the workshop *Inner Journeys and Life Choices: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as Guidance Models*, fostered the integration of professional development and personal life planning, in accordance with the guidance-oriented perspective promoted by the DPCM of 4 August 2023 (Della Volpe, 2025).

The fourth is the generative function, which is expressed through the production of transferable educational models consistent with the principles of service learning (Colazzo et al., 2018). The convergence of the three cohorts in identifying instructional design competence as the most significantly developed area (55% overall) provides evidence of this generative outcome and suggests its robustness across participants with markedly different biographical and professional profiles.

A critical perspective on the limitations of the study is nevertheless required. The limited duration of the indirect practicum modules, the self-reported nature of part of the evidence collected, and the concentration of the sample within only two subject areas do not allow for broad generalizations. Furthermore, the implementation of the indirect practicum by a single coordinating tutor ensured consistency in the educational approach but simultaneously constitutes a limitation with regard to the transferability of findings and the variability of observed practices. Consequently, the evidence presented here should be regarded as exploratory and warrants further investigation through larger-scale studies and longitudinal research designs capable of tracing the evolution of reflective processes and professional competences over time.

VII. Conclusion

This study has proposed a reinterpretation of the role of the coordinating tutor within the Italian university-based teacher qualification pathways (PEF 30, PEF 36, and PEF 60 ECTS) as an epistemic guide to professional reflexivity. The regulatory framework established by the DPCM of 4 August 2023 assigns the coordinating tutor a set of responsibilities which, from the theoretical perspective adopted in this study, can be understood as four interconnected dimensions of structured professional accompaniment: epistemic, reflective, relational, and design-oriented.

The findings derived from the structured questionnaire ($n = 65$), administered across all three qualification pathways activated at Roma Tre University during the 2024/2025 academic year, suggest that participants attribute particular value to reflective tutorial mediation, especially in relation to metacognitive development and professional identity formation.

Stimulated reflection (66% Extremely), personal professional growth (62%), and the development of guidance-oriented instructional design competences (55%) emerged as the most highly valued educational outcomes across all three groups, despite their markedly different professional and biographical profiles. The distinction between PEF30 participants—experienced teachers for whom the indirect practicum represents the only formal educational component of the pathway—and PEF60/PEF36 participants, who combine indirect and direct practicum experiences, highlights how tutorial mediation assumes partially different functions across contexts. This diversity requires coordinating tutors to exercise considerable pedagogical flexibility and to adopt differentiated approaches to participants' educational needs.

From a broader perspective, the model of professional accompaniment outlined in this study may be regarded as a theoretical and methodological contribution to the systemic design of teacher qualification pathways. The findings suggest that professional reflexivity constitutes a central dimension of initial teacher education and that tutorial mediation may represent a particularly effective means of fostering its development.

It is hoped that the role of the coordinating tutor, recognized by the DPCM as a key institutional component of the Italian teacher education system, will receive increasing attention in terms of professional development opportunities, institutional investment, and formal professional recognition..

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