Expertise, justice, reciprocity: the three roots of teachers' credibility

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Abstract: Credibility is one of the most important factors that distinguish a 'good teacher'. But what is credibility? When and why is a teacher credible? In a sociological perspective, this paper considers credibility not merely as a personal quality of the sender, but as a relationship that is always full of risks, subject to continuous negotiations between teachers and students during classroom interactions. On the basis of a literature review, this work indicates three 'roots' through which students can recognise a teacher as credible and grant him/her their trust: a) not only disciplinary expertise, but also didactic and communicative expertise; b) the ability to express values that students can appreciate in his/her work, such as seriousness, commitment, and justice; c) communication of a sense of attention and care for each student as a person, with his/her distinctive characteristics and needs. Finally, the paper proposes a distinction between 'credibility of the role', which indicates the amount of prestige and the social status enjoyed by the teaching profession and educational institutions in today's society, and 'credibility in the role', which indicates how the teacher assumes and practises this role, making it credible or not credible in the concrete interactions in which he/she is involved, starting from classroom interactions with his/her students.

Key words. Teachers' credibility, Classroom interaction, Communicative competence, Educational relationship, Professional role

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Introduction

In 2012, the multimedia and publishing group Pearson commissioned a comparative study on the quality and efficiency of educational systems in over fifty countries worldwide to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), an important centre of economic studies. *The Learning Curve* [2], which is the name of the research programme, uses a 'global index' that measures students' cognitive abilities and achievement levels crossing the OECD-PISA data with indicators derived from national statistics, including the number of high school and university graduates, public education expenditures, unemployment rates, and teachers' wages.

The research shows that "good teachers are essential to high-quality education". Although "there is no agreed list of traits to define and identify an excellent teacher", the authors of the report note that "successful school systems have a number of things in common: they find culturally effective ways to attract the best people to the profession, they provide relevant ongoing training, they give teachers a status similar to that of other respected professions".

These observations put teachers or, more precisely, teachers' credibility back to the centre of the debate on the quality of educational systems. This paper intends to propose a critical analysis of this concept, by enquiring: who are credible teachers? What are the characteristics, forms, signs, and conditions of their credibility?

Credibility and its roots

Credibility is the ability to be believed [3]. According to common belief, credibility is a personal quality that distinguishes those who are consistent, honest, sincere, and trustworthy. This was also Aristotle's opinion (Rhetoric, A 2, 1356a 1-20), according to which we believe in honest people more easily, especially for matters that do not involve certainty, but

[2] http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/the-report
[3] On the concept of credibility and its importance in the context of a general theory of communication, cf. Gili, 2005 and 2006.

disputableness. Thus, credibility appears at first glance as a personal quality, a person's moral feature.

However, contemporary psycho-social reflection has changed this perspective: credibility is not merely a personal characteristic, but rather something that is allocated and recognised by others. Although obviously it cannot be separated from personal qualities, which constitute its foundation, credibility is not a person's intrinsic characteristic, but a relationship. Thus, it often happens that those who are credible for some people are not for others, or at least not for the same reasons, in the same way and level. In this relationship there is always a 'projected credibility' and a 'perceived credibility', which constitute its two facets. The first relates to credibility from the sender's perspective and it concerns the self-definition and self-image that the sender is trying to build and validate. The second involves credibility from the receiver's point of view, i.e. credibility that the receiver attributes to the sender, and which may also considerably deviate from the first (in this case we speak of a credibility gap). The amount of credibility perceived by the receiver is the foundation for the amount of trust he will give to the sender [4].

There is also another aspect that should be highlighted. In any communicative relationship, people give each other greater or less credibility. However, as noted by Gadamer (1967), the attribution of credibility to someone is the agreement on which every communicative and social relationship rests. At the very moment in which we address someone, we implicitly accept that he can speak sensibly and tell the truth. Even misunderstandings or deceptions are necessarily preceded by some esteem and trust in others [5].

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[4] The general theoretical framework of this distinction is Goffman's (1959, Introduction) reflection on communication strategies with which individuals seek to (directly) control their 'expressions' for the purpose of (indirectly) guiding the 'impressions' that others derive from them in a way favourable to them. This distinction has since been widely accepted and used not only in reference to interpersonal relations, but also in business studies and political science.

[5] On the fiduciary roots of communicative relationship, cf. Gili and Colombo, 2012, chapter 2.

Credibility can be based on three different roots, that is to say three 'reasons' for which we can recognise someone as credible, reliable, and trustworthy.

The first root is constituted by knowledge and expertise. It is the kind of credibility that is recognised to 'one who knows' and takes responsibility for what he/she says. The two main forms of this first root of credibility are credibility of witnesses in good faith and experts' credibility. A witness is someone who sees an event and truthfully reports what he has seen, although this does not preclude that he/she may incur oversights and errors of perception and memory. Experts are instead those who have knowledge based on rigorous methods and procedures. In modern western culture, scientists are those who embody this form of credibility in an exemplary fashion. More generally, credibility based on knowledge and expertise is also that of teachers as experts in a particular discipline, doctors capable of diagnosing and treating according to the dictates of medical science, or journalists who do their job according to the rules of accuracy, completeness, and verifiability of information.

The second root concerns values. It is the kind of credibility we assign to people who embody the ideal ways of being and acting that we consider good, righteous, reputable, and desirable (Kluckhohn, 1951). In fact, we tend to consider more credible those people who share our values or those who, for their social status or conduct of personal life, embody the values that enjoy greater respect and consideration in our society. We could still recognise as credible those who show consistency between their behaviours and the values they affirm, even if these values are different from ours, or they have a minor importance in our society.

The third root of credibility is constituted by attachment and affectivity. At its base there is the perception of a positive bond with each other and a source of well-being, as it happens, for example, in mother-child relationships, especially during the years of primary socialization. The emotional root of credibility also operates in friendships and, in general, in all those relationships in which we feel sympathy, an immediate human correspondence with each other. That is, we tend to give more credit to 'nice' people (Cialdini, 1993) and towards whom we have a positive

feeling rather than to those we dislike and by which we feel instinctively rejected.

In reference to these three roots of credibility, two caveats are necessary. First, credibility has an extension, due to the width of the sphere of situations to which it applies. There is a 'sectorial' credibility, which refers to specific subjects and areas, and a 'general' credibility. Credibility based on knowledge and expertise tends, at least in our society, to be specific and limited and indeed it is based precisely on this aspect. In the past, the ideal of 'wisdom' embraced all human knowledge and coincided with an ideal of moral perfection (Donati, 2002). With the development of modern science, expertise has become more and more narrow and specialized, referring to a single object or a well-defined area. 'Specific' credibility causes a person to be credible in a context or a particular theme, but it is not necessarily the same if referring to another context or a different topic. For instance, a good mathematician is very believable in his field of study, but can be absolutely unreliable when he/she has to recommend a good movie to a friend. Generalized credibility is instead attributed to the person as such, or to what he/she represents. Normative credibility (second root) and, even more, credibility based on attachment and affection (third root), tend to be generalized forms of credibility in this precise sense, based more on entrustment than on specific skills.

Secondly, in real life, the three roots of credibility that we have presented here in an analytical perspective in their distinctive features tend to intertwine and overlap. Each concrete relationship is based on the concrete composition of the three types of credibility, in different forms and in different ways. A doctor's credibility, for instance, is certainly based on his professional expertise (the first root), but not only. Patients trust him when they feel that the doctor is genuinely concerned about their well-being and health, that is to say that he/she is capable of expressing professional and human values of attention to their person in the interpersonal relationship (the second root). Finally, it is also vital for the patient to see an aspect of human sympathy in the doctor; he/she should not feel him/her as detached and aloof, but friendly and 'easygoing' (the third root of credibility) [6].

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[6] On this aspect, cf. Nettleton, 2006 and Heritage and Maynard, 2006.

Teachers' credibility

Like any other social role, also teachers' role is at the centre of a system of different and often conflicting expectations: students, parents, colleagues, and principals' expectations, and also the Ministry, the media system, and society's expectations. Though not neglecting the other parties, this contribution will focus on the expectations of credibility that come from students in actual classroom interaction [7].

The dimensions of expertise

In the teaching profession, credibility that comes from knowledge and expertise is manifested in a variety of dimensions.

A teacher is first and foremost an expert in a discipline or a set of disciplines. Therefore, the first dimension is disciplinary expertise, which is associated more immediately to the idea of a 'good' teacher (Troman, 1996). Of course, this expertise can be more or less specialized, depending on the grade, the type of school, and the discipline taught. Moreover, it does not include only a theoretical dimension, but it can also include skills and practical abilities, for example in technical-practical and laboratory disciplines (i.e. expertise also includes aspects such as skills, experience, and training) (Bostrom, 1983, chapter 4).

The second dimension of expertise is the 'ability to teach', that is to say, the set of teaching skills and methodologies that allow communicating disciplinary and cultural content in the most effective and engaging way. Knowing how to teach does not simply mean mastering the contents of a discipline: it is also necessary to know how to communicate and transmit these contents. In this sense, a teacher's professionalism is qualified and complex, and it requires an appropriate training, since it also requires educational, pedagogical, and psychological skills, in addition to disciplinary skills.

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[7] For an introduction to studies on classroom interaction, cf. Stubbs and Delamont, 1976; McCroskey, 1998; Selleri, 1994; Fele and Paoletti, 2003.

The third dimension is communicative expertise [8]. An essential aspect of teachers' competence is the ability to identify the communication methods that best meet their educational goals, the concrete situations of interaction, and the wider socio-cultural context in which they work. Students are the teacher's 'ratified receivers'[9]. His/her communication must then be tailored for those students and not referred to an abstract model of recipient that exists only in his/her ideal representation. A good teacher, it is now usual to repeat, is a good communicator. But a good communicator is one who, in Mead's words (1934), knows how to take on the stance of role and attitude of others, i.e. he/she is able to consider the point of view of others, to interpret and accommodate the others' expectations toward himself/herself. Self-referential communication is poor communication; actually, it is non-sense, inevitably doomed to failure.

Finally, there is a fourth dimension of expertise: using an expression borrowed from Goffman (1959), we can define it as a 'dramaturgic' competence or ability. The characteristic of the teacher's work is to constantly take place in the limelight. There are trades and professions that take place mostly behind the scenes, especially those jobs dealing with the production or maintenance of objects. Whereas the teaching profession is always held in front of an audience. Being constantly exposed to others' gazes, which always contain expectations and judgments, makes a decisive contribution to the stress that many teachers suffer (Troman, 2000; Troman and Woods, 2001) and can also result in more severe form of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Leiter and Maslach, 1998). Though the teacher has to deal with these problems in each grade level, they appear to be particularly onerous in adolescents' classes (Andreoli, 1997; Pietropolli Charmet 2000). In fact, the conquest of one's own independent identity in adolescence passes through a de-idealization of the adult figures. However, this process tends to occur earlier and earlier so that even in primary school it is already a component of the difficult teachers-students relationship [10].

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[8] For a critical discussion on the concept of communicative competence and its different levels and aspects, cf. Gili and Colombo, 2012, pp. 197-214. On teacher's communicative competence in classroom interaction, cf. McCroskey, 1982, 1998.

[9] On the concept of 'ratified' or 'designated receivers', cf. Goffman, 1981, chapter 2.

[10] Various scholars also point out the role that the mass media, and television in particular, play in this process. For instance, Meyrowitz (1985) has suggested that television, through

Teachers' dramaturgic abilities are specified in two aspects: 'dynamism' and 'immediacy'. Dynamism is essentially the energy and the emotional involvement that the teacher invests in his/her representation, the ability to control and animate the relational climate of the class; immediacy is the willingness to 'close the gap' with students, for instance by calling them by name or by reducing interpersonal distances. The ability to keep the scene includes not only the aspect of linguistic competence, but also non-verbal skills (vocal variety, facial expressions, direction of gaze, posture, gestures, and proxemics), to which many personal signs of credibility are related [11]. Research on perceived credibility indicates the importance that these aspects assume in students' motivation, attention, learning, and memory processes [12]. This condition is so decisive that cannot be ignored even in the experiences of distance learning (Walther, 1992; Swan, 2002).

Values in the training action

The second root of credibility is based on values. They develop in two directions: professional values and the values that guide relationships with students. These two aspects, as it is easy to guess, are intertwined, but for the sake of clarity it is appropriate to examine them separately.

We can be more or less 'sincere' or 'cynical' towards our social and professional roles (Goffman, 1959, chapter 1; 1961, chapter 2). We identify ourselves with our role when we 'believe' in the role we are playing, feeling that it corresponds to our own motivation and abilities, it contributes to our personal fulfilment. On the opposite, we assume a 'cynical' attitude (a term that should not necessarily be assigned a negative moral significance) in all situations where we assume a greater distance

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information and fiction, prematurely reveal to children the unpleasant backstories of the adult world, so that they prematurely ripen a disenchantment towards the world of adults and the values they claim.

[11] On the exhibited and perceived signs of credibility through the communicative style, cf. Argyle, 1975; Ekman, 1982; Burgoon, Birk, and Pfau, 1990; Bacharach and Gambetta, 2001.

[12] Cf. McCroskey and Young, 1981; Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey, 1987; Kelly and Gorham, 1988; Gorham, 1988; Sanders and Wiseman, 1990; Christophel, 1990; McCroskey and Richmond, 1992; Frymier, 1993; Booth-Butterfield and Gutowski, 1994; Myers, Guam & Zhong, 1998; Haskins, 2000.

from the role, in which the role is taken without too much involvement, mostly on the basis of extrinsic goals (e.g., salary or social prestige).

In the interlocutors' eyes, a motivated teacher is instantly more credible. His/her attitude could be defined as the willingness to teach following the 'best standards', a concept that can be applied not only to artisan work (Sennett, 2008), but also to intellectual work. This has some implications. The first is the need of updating. Who has to 'transmit' knowledge runs the risk of easing down into routine. However, teachers are also producers of knowledge, not only because all disciplines continually see new discoveries and acquisitions, but also because it is inherent to their professionalism to keep cognitive tension and intellectual curiosity alive. A second implication is that one should not improvise. Improvisation makes you lose credibility. It is no coincidence that research on students' perceived credibility (McCroskey and Young, 1981) indicates the importance of lesson planning, that is to say to be organized for content presentation and to provide information as clear as possible, free of errors and inaccuracies.

Here it is clear that professional values are intertwined with the values that guide the relationship with students. Teachers, consciously or not, are always a positive or negative model for their students. To submit oneself first to the rules of reliability, consistency, accuracy, and timeliness brings out the 'sociological' core of any fiduciary relationship: reciprocity of expectations, the possibility of knowing what can be legitimately expected from each other. In this sense, rules 'help' and support the relationship, they give a sense and predictability to it.

The second greatest value that gives credibility to the teacher and that is always invoked by students is justice: who is righteous and does not show favouritisms is credible. However, the issue is more complex than this, because the specific intra-role conflict typical of educational and care professions is rooted on justice (Merton, 1957, 1968, Goffman 1961). On the one hand, it requires the teacher to treat all students according to a universalistic criterion, without particularisms and favouritisms. On the other hand, it requires the teacher to be sensitive and understanding, and to pay specific attention to each student's biography, history, needs, and potential. The teacher must therefore be able to mediate between the universalistic criterion, which prescribes to treat everyone equally

regardless of subjective matters, with attention to each pupil's path and specific needs. This tension is also found in relation to the problem of school performance and students' evaluation, when the teacher has to actually decide whether to give more weight to a uniform evaluation in absolute terms or he/she should take more account of the journey undertaken by the individual student and the different constraints, not only inside but also outside the classroom (Brint, 1998, chapters 5-6; Gasperoni, 1997).

But the problem of justice and injustice arises also in another aspect, since justice has a plurality of dimensions, as is clear from the studies on interactions at workplaces (Adams, 1965; Adams and Jacobsen, 1964). First, there is a 'distributive justice', which is to receive fair compensation for what has been produced; for instance, you cannot give different marks for two similar tests. Then there is a 'procedural justice', which is to guarantee the same procedures of performance to everyone. One cannot impose strict compliance of turn-taking to some pupils, while others are allowed to intervene freely. Finally, there is an 'interactional justice' (but we could also call it 'relational'): the teacher can be flawless in the classroom in the assessment processes and procedures, but he/she will appear unfair if during recreation he/she stops to talk only with his/her favourite students.

The subjective perception that the students have about equitable treatment from the teacher has important consequences on their motivation and behaviour: to feel unfairly treated or not feel justly rewarded for their efforts can produce an aggressive response, of withdrawal or balance downward (if I get a little, I am encouraged to give a little).

Reciprocity and trust

The teachers-students relationship is a complementary relationship in its original structure, since it assumes a subject (the teacher) provided with greater experience and knowledge resources, who guides others, and is institutionally recognised as an 'expert' [13]. However, to express the full potential of training and education, this relationship cannot be polarized in

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[13] On the characteristics of complementary and symmetrical relationships, cf. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967, chapter 2.

an absolute opposition, but it must be 'corrected' and balanced by symmetry elements, reciprocal listening and, in some respects, mutual learning. The third root of a teacher's credibility is expressed in this reciprocity. Reciprocity, as shown by various studies on perceived credibility, manifests itself in two inter-related aspects.

a) The first aspect is the students' perception that the teacher cares about them and their well-being (Teven and McCroskey, 1997; McCroskey, 1998). It is that dimension of credibility that makes the student think: "you are credible not only because you are competent, you know how to teach, you are righteous and passionate about what you do, but mainly because you look at me and you listen to me. Because you are interested in my person". There is no need to mention great philosophers or psychologists to say that a fundamental demand of human beings, especially in the years of their growth and their identity's achievement, is to be recognised by others, in particular the 'significant others' (parents, friends, and teachers), because of their distinctive characteristics and needs[14].

b) The second aspect of reciprocity is mutual fiduciary relationship. The teacher can gain trust if he is able to trust and to enhance the student (each student) and his/her contribution to the shared school work (Bellini, 2012). The psycho-social contributions on perceived credibility (McCroskey and Young, 1981; Frymier and Thompson, 1992) speak in this regard of an exchange of credibility and trust despite the complementarity of roles and expectations.

At the same time, we must not forget that reciprocity and trust are related to the idea of risk, a 'bet' on the other's freedom, which is the very essence of the educational relationship. As observed by a scholar of trust relationships: "Trust is related to the fact that agents have a degree of freedom to disappoint our expectations. For trust to be relevant there must be the possibility of *exit*, betrayal, defection. If other people's actions were heavily constrained, the role of trust in governing our decisions would be proportionately smaller […]. Trust can be, and has been, more generally defined as a device for coping with others' freedom " (Gambetta, 1988, pp. 218-9).

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[14] A key indicator of this attitude is the relationship of the teacher with students with disabilities. In this regard, cf. Ferrucci, 2004.

Teachers should be open to confrontation with their students' freedom. And students should find in their teachers a benchmark for their own growth. In this way, the first root of a teachers' credibility – expertise in their subject and the ability to teach it well – gives respect. The second root – adherence to the value of commitment to their profession and justice toward students – produces esteem. The third root – which is reciprocity in the relationship – allows the dialogue and confrontation with an adult personality, in which the students can mature the ability of self-guidance and judgment on oneself and others despite the diversity of temperaments and opinions.

Credibility of the role and credibility in the role

Different professional roles have greater or lesser degrees of prestige and social consideration: we can therefore speak of a 'credibility of the role' or profession. Some professions have a high credibility, which is an important prop to support an individual's credibility (and identity) performing that role, while others have low social status and this can also cast a negative shadow on the individual social actor and his/her image.

What is the heritage of credibility that the teaching profession enjoys in Italy today? It is not difficult to recognise that this heritage has been greatly eroded in recent decades. First, there has been a reduction of occupational prestige. Once teaching was with no doubt considered an intellectual profession and as such it deserved respect. Only few people studied and an expert teacher was a beholder of a valuable and socially appreciated resource. This was also evident in the salary level, which was higher than that of the working class and white-collar workers. For these reasons, also along with authoritarian pedagogical concepts, the prestige of the teacher's function was not questioned [15].

In addition, the parents thought that school education could be a means of upward social mobility, an opportunity for improvement in the living conditions of their children. Thus, it was worth fighting and making

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[15] For an effective and balanced introduction to the various theories of education and training, cf. Chiosso, 2005.

sacrifices to ensure them a better future. There was the idea that education contributed to the formation of a social and cultural capital, which could be spent to better deal with every aspect of life (Scanagatta and Maccarini, 2009).

The situation is radically different nowadays. Schools no longer have the monopoly and centrality of education and training. Many other training agencies have arisen, not least the mass media and new media. We speak usually of life-long learning to indicate that training can no longer be limited to the initial period of life, but it is now an ongoing need in view of the numerous re-socializations and new beginnings, which characterise the working experiences of many people[16]. Finally, with the deep economic crisis of recent years, schools seems less and less invested with the positive value of opportunity, a gym, a trampoline that prepares for the future.

Thus, the educational institution in general and teachers in particular enjoy less respect, prestige, and credibility. Therefore, teachers' intentionality and commitment often clash with broader contextual factors that frustrate motivation and the initiative of many of them.

For these reasons, we need to broaden the perspective of analysis to the overall structure of the educational system. This system is organized on three different levels: a macro level, which is the national education system, its legislation, and overall organization; a meso-level, intermediate, which is the territorial school system and individual institutions; a micro level, i.e. that of the class and the concrete interaction taking place between teachers and students (Brint, 1998, chapter 1).

These three levels influence themselves in both directions. However, generally, the influence from top to bottom, from macro to micro is more noticeable. Legislation and general organization of the school system can promote and encourage the teachers' work, but can also create many barriers and constrains. If the school system as a whole looks like 'plastered' and bureaucratized, unable to renew itself and enhance institutional autonomy and personal commitment, this will negatively affect teachers' motivations and initiatives[17].

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[16] On the challenge this poses to school system and its social function, cf. Donati, 2002.
[17] Various Italian sociological contributions have highlighted this relationship: e.g. Ribolzi, 1997; Fischer, Fischer & Masuelli, 2002; Benadusi & Consoli, 2004.

However, we must not forget that the relationship also applies in the opposite direction: the micro can affect the macro. If a teacher works in a school with a bad reputation, but he/she is competent, serious, and interested in his/her students, he/she can create in the classroom interaction a social 'space' that contradicts that negative image. Even if he/she teaches a discipline that is less prominent, but has the ability to make it interesting and followed, or acts as a mediator and facilitator in the relationship with the other teachers, this helps improve the social climate of the school. And parents, seeing competent and enthusiast teachers, may invest in their children's training with more conviction.

Next to 'credibility of the role', which is unfortunately challenged on several fronts, there is therefore a 'credibility in the role', i.e. the way in which the teacher – though with all the constraints that exist in schools and in the Italian cultural climate – personally lives that role, plays it, imprints his/her personality in it. This credibility is certainly perceived and recognised by his/her students and this not only promotes learning, but makes a decisive contribution to the growth of judgment capacities, motivation, and the energy with which they approach reality.

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