

Article

Making Informal Adult Learning Visible. The Recognition of the Third Sector Professionals' Key Competences

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Abstract: The third sector represents a vast and heterogeneous universe that has a key role in society from both the social and civil points of view. It also represents an informal learning context where competence and knowledge are acquired, often in a tacit and indirect way. This research focuses on the key competences of the third sector professionals and on the pedagogical methods to make them visible and to encourage their recognition. The quantitative and qualitative data sources include: questionnaires, focus groups, and diaries. The results show that the informal learning of key competences by professionals is a primary result of their activities that should be given greater visibility. Six areas of expertise have been identified in order to classify the range of knowledge and competence. The pedagogical approach has highlighted the importance of the tutor who applies narrative tutoring methods to facilitate the recognition of competences and their enhancement for personal and professional development. The full enhancement of competences, considered as the strengthening of people's reflection and planning potential, requires policies that can be effectively applied to the national competences certification system.

Keywords: informal learning; key competences; tacit knowledge; third sector; volunteering; learning recognition; pedagogical tutoring

1. Introduction

The third sector represents a vast universe that has a central role in the society for its increasing importance from both the social and civil points of view. It also considers the peculiar nature of organizations working in the public environment where there are rights to be protected or to be recognized, common goods to be cared for or developed, and people with temporary or permanent difficulties needing help exercising their rights and prerogatives.

By breaking a consolidated taboo the International Labour Office [1] has defined volunteering as work, the concept of competence—until then only associated with manufacturing and training—has progressively obtained the citizenship right also in the third sector. Volunteering is *sui generis* work due to the lack of remuneration and of direct or indirect advantages but it is certainly a kind of work in the full sense of the word due to the physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychic energies needed to carry it out. Volunteering can be considered a job since it is aimed at achieving an output or goal or at implementing a project, whether concrete or not. The volunteering activity performed and carried out, thanks to its characteristics of organizational flexibility and adaptation to the needs of the surrounding environment, does not only consolidate competences in more traditional areas, but there is also a constant attempt to meet new needs. It also develops new engagement frontiers by sometimes introducing innovations into some jobs. This strengthens the volunteers' competences, above all the transversal ones, and can also be applied to sectors and contexts different from those where they were born and developed [2].

Due to these specific characteristics of the third sector, it becomes necessary to understand the nature and type of competences of various organizations belonging to the third sector, especially regarding professionals who manage and lead its processes. Considering the multiple varieties of areas that are part of the third sector, it can be assumed that there are transversal competences, which are recurrent in managers and executives who deal with the organization's governance. In this regard, the National Third Sector Forum (FNTS), the representative body of the third sector recognized by the Italian government, has carried out an activity to identify areas of competence of third sector professionals in a transversal sense. This work referred on the one hand to the Italian regulatory provisions on voluntary work, including in particular the Legislative Decree of 6 March 2017, n. 40 about the organization of universal civil service. On the other hand, it referred to the key competences for lifelong learning defined by the European Union [3] and by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [4].

This is certainly a broad debate that has lasted for decades and has not ended yet.

There are also opposing positions as evident from studies criticizing the OECD's vast development of competences and highlighting contrary positions since they express the risk of educational inequality and of an interpretation of competences based on productive and commercial motivations [5].

This preliminary study about the competences belonging to the third sector emphasized noncognitive competences, and this position was based on studies that have tried to divide the key competences into cognitive/hard, i.e., relating to encoded disciplinary knowledge, and noncognitive/soft, i.e., linked to personality, the emotional and motivational sphere, and to social competences [6].

On this basis, the FNTS has identified areas of key competences that seem to better reflect the activities performed by third sector professionals: personal and social, communicative, managerial and leadership, change management, team, and networking competences. These, however, are general areas that need to be described according to repertoire logic and in terms of competence and knowledge.

The third sector key competences mainly refer to an informal learning context, which represents a concept developed since the second half of the last century [7,8]. Informal learning implies the adoption of a participation-based paradigm, typical of social learning contexts, rather than the acquisition paradigm, typical of educational contexts [9].

This implies that the competences are tacit because they are included in the behaviors applied and do not come from intentional training programs [10,11]. Tacit knowledge and competence are difficult to express as they are put in place in practice and by following personal experience in social learning contexts [12].

On this basis, it can be said that professionals and voluntary organizations are in principle not fully aware of the wealth of competences. The need, therefore, arises to enhance the human and social capital of the third sector managers through methods and tools suitable for identifying, analyzing and promoting these competences which need to be maintained and developed in subsequent life experiences and training opportunities for the whole course of life and in the perspective of lifelong learning.

The Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education adopted by UNESCO in 2015 states that the competences deriving from the participation in nonformal and informal learning contexts should be acknowledged and certified [13].

In this regard, the third sector can play an important role in promoting the recognition and certification of nonformal and informal learning.

Learning experiences in volunteering should be assessed in an independent way and not according to the standards of formal education and training. The validation in the third sector can also include the recognition of social and civic competences, as well as of transversal and life competences acquired in informal contexts and by volunteering activities [14].

Third sector organizations consider nonformal and informal learning as an important result of their activities that should be given greater visibility. It is, therefore, crucial to actively involve the third sector in the acknowledgment and certification procedures [14].

It was shown, however, that the acknowledgment of informal learning is not yet consistently known [15], and in particular the third sector, is poorly explored from the research point of view.

Recent studies highlight the importance of tutoring to acknowledge tacit competences [16] and for promoting the identification and documentation of learning outcomes [17]. Tutoring developed in a narrative pedagogical approach [18] represents an important way to encourage people to become aware of and to think about their education, namely to talk about tacit competence and knowledge.

1.1. Context

The third sector represents a very diversified universe that has sometimes undefined boundaries, up until the implementation of Law 106/2016. For this reason, this broad horizon was defined in the past as a patchwork [19]. Despite the difficulties that such a diversified situation inevitably entails, this aspect has the advantage of describing the flexible shape and the often magmatic trend of this universe.

The National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT)) has surveyed 12 types of nonprofit organizations (today decreased to 11, following Law 106/2016). They include social cooperatives, foundations, voluntary associations, mutual and social security associations, pension advisory service associations, social action associations, and nongovernmental organizations. The census carried out by ISTAT has recorded over 300,000 nonprofit organizations with over 950,000 workers, including just over 40,000 employees, as well as external workers and temporary collaborators. Volunteering service, which in the strictest sense could be defined as the beating heart of the third sector, is excluded from these figures. In 2014, ISTAT tried to quantify this phenomenon by reporting that 6.63 million Italians (i.e., 12.6% of the Italian citizens) worked as volunteers in 2013 both in organized and individual forms, with a higher percentage of volunteering activities carried out on an individual basis.

This limited data is enough to give an idea of the heritage of values, civil passion, knowledge, and competence of the third sector that fuel it with lifeblood.

These hints of the characteristics of volunteering allow that the concept of competence represents a keystone to describe and analyze the work, commitment, and effort in the third sector.

1.2. Research Questions

The subject chosen for the analysis aimed at developing research activities is these key competences of third sector professionals and the procedures for recognizing these competences.

The research aimed at answering cognitive questions about the characteristics of third sector professionals' key competences and the best ways to enhance them (are the following):

1. What are the specific characteristics of the key competences of third sector managers and executives?
2. How can the key competences of third sector professionals be recognized, identified, and documented?

These questions were then transformed into the following objectives:

1. Building the range of the key competences of third sector managers and executives on a qualitative–quantitative basis
2. Develop pedagogical procedures and tools for acknowledging and documenting the competences of third sector managers and executives.

The research took place from April 2017 to May 2018.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was developed based on a blended qualitative–quantitative method [20] structured with two objectives:

1. Building the repertoire of key competences using a structured questionnaire and focus group.

2. Recognition and documentation of key competences, for which a complex path was used consisting of a procedure where the activities of information, reconstruction, and identification of competences were carried out. During this stage, tutoring activities based, a diary was used in order to help the advisors carrying out this path with the aim of recording information, data, impressions, and assessments considered significant and encouraging the discussion of the contents emerged [21].

2.1. Questionnaire and Focus Group

The repertoire of competences can have different elements for which multiple identification tools should be used.

The study started with a quantitative sample survey, and a questionnaire carried out by using an online survey technique, Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), allowing the direct and nonintermediary/indirect involvement of the target audience and, at the same time, facilitating their participation in the initiative.

The questionnaire was divided into sections according to specific topics (working life, technological equipment, and information technology competence, language competence, human resources, training, and innovation) aimed at allowing the best explanation of the qualitative meaning of actions and behaviors.

This questionnaire was distributed in April and May 2017 and was carried out in different stages:

- Acquisition of the database of references provided by the client (FNTS), complete with direct contact information;
- Drafting of the questionnaire to be submitted to the target based on information about the context provided by the FNTS representatives;
- Scheduling of the questionnaire utilizing the online platform (NIPO software);
- Telephone calls to inform the interlocutors about the initiative;
- Sending invitations by email to participate in the survey, monitoring the interviews and recall by mail/telephone of nonrespondents;
- Ending sample collection, database systemization, and statistic processing of the collected data.

After implementing the quantitative survey with the questionnaire, focus groups were created in July–November 2017.

The choice of using focus groups as a qualitative technique for collecting information or as a better detection technique for the study using debates between a small group of people with the presence of one or more moderators and focusing on a topic that we want to investigate in depth [22], is due to the need to deepen a complex and not fully explored theme such as the relationship between competences and the third sector.

The choice was also determined by the need to interpret the subject of the research from the point of view of interested parties, in order to understand their perspective starting from the assumption that the interaction between people in a group creates added value to the knowledge of the topic, and to encourage the emersion of original information thanks to the interpersonal communication and to the so-called avalanche effect.

The participants in the focus group were asked to comment on the possible confirmation, modification, and integration of the areas of competence and to identify and describe the knowledge and behavior associated with them in each area.

The focus was articulated in four main stages:

- Explanation by the moderator of the grid of key competences. The description of the grid was preceded by an examination of the concept of competence in order to share its meaning and then adopt a common definition.
- Understanding of the basic contents of the topic, reflecting on the proposed grid, and creating a hierarchy of competences and a definition of knowledge and related behaviors. In this regard,

it was essential to specify the criteria to prioritize the competences. The participants were asked to explain their choices starting with their own experience in the third sector, that is, which behaviors or competences were concretely applied during their daily activities.

- Presentation of the results of each participant's reflections on the whole group.
- Group discussions and insights into the individual works and of the whole grid: underlining additions, similarities, differences, and changes to be made to the basic proposal.

The moderator was supported by an observer, who, without directly interacting with the group, had only the tasks of recording the information generated from the interaction between the group, as well as the most significant dynamics, and above all, transcribing the results by the prioritization of key competences obtained by using datasheets.

2.2. The Path of Recognition of Competences

This section is aimed at describing the method used to create a device for the recognition of the FNTS professionals' key competences.

The literature has identified the existence of a positive correlation between the presence of individual tutoring activities and the success of the recognition process of prior learning [18].

Although the European quality criteria of the examined procedure clearly provide for the candidate's tutoring [14], some comparative studies highlight basic heterogeneity characterizing, and in general, how this procedure is concretely implemented in specific national situations and, in particular, in the tutoring stage [23,24].

For these reasons, this research considers tutoring as a key variable element for the success of the recognition procedure and, as a consequence, some experts have been present at all stages of the research.

As part of this research, qualitative methods were applied to tutoring activities which refer to biographical approach [25] and to *bilan des compétences* [26]. These methods can be considered particularly functional for implementing processes focused on the person in order to rebuild his work and experience path, which is considered, even by the most recent European guidelines, as a fundamental step of the recognition process.

Middle managers or FNTS managers were given the opportunity to participate on a voluntary basis in the stage aimed at studying the procedure for the recognition of key competences.

To examine the implemented actions, it is necessary to consider at least two closely related issues that help clarify the choices and adaptations made (in terms of methods, tools, and structure of paths) according to the nature of the investigation and the characteristics of the final recipients.

The first question concerns the central position of the person who consciously and intentionally decides to deal with the complexity of formalizing both what is nonformal and informal, making the tacit learning and knowledge transparent and valuable [17].

This person's role is crucial in the recognition processes; that is where the ability to reread and re-elaborate one's own experiences is required, where facts, memory, emotions, and effects are present through the filter of his own history and reflective re-elaboration, where the application of emotional, relational and cognitive resources, and processes is required and does not constitute a spontaneous and automatic action, but needs to be accompanied and mediated by something "other than oneself" who supports this reflection path [27].

The second question consequently deals with the fact of privileging and with an autobiographical narrative approach, as well as the adoption of tools and techniques able to encourage the activation, self-assessment, and reflection of a person within his gradual acquisition of awareness about his competences [28], especially during the first stage of the path. These tools should respect the person's uniqueness by transforming it into a resource value and should provide coherence and meaning to the experience by facilitating the rebuilding of various fragments through the story and discovery of their relationship. It is important to stress that most of the tools used were borrowed from the *bilan des compétences* which, as a customized device for supporting and developing a person's reflection and

design potential, strongly speaks to the person and to his experience, making it particularly suitable for supporting and soliciting the reflection process of thinking about our actions and behaviors without which an experience, like water flowing on an inclined glass, risks slipping without leaving any trace or evidence [26].

The recognition of learning and competences requires the presence of people with great ability to explain their experiences and to consciously reprocess their competences. They require the ability to collect and produce evidence of competence and to build a portfolio [29]: all activities that should be accompanied by a process proper to the *bilan des compétences* [26].

A tool kit has been prepared that must be used in a diversified way, trying to keep under control the risk of a too mechanical use that does not take into account the different objectives to be pursued in the recognition process. On the one hand, it must bring out, rebuild, and analyze the experience gained by the person both in nonformal and informal contexts, and on the other hand, it must describe and document this experience, making it both visible and communicable [14].

Tools and methods—structured and semistructured datasheets, survey grids, questionnaires, summary datasheets, portfolio, or professional files—which represent opportunities to allow a person to freely express himself according to his vocabulary and mental categories and, therefore, go on independently at his own pace within a more or less traced path.

To ensure consistency during the integrated use of these various tools, the interview was the preferred means used during the whole recognition path. Without discussing the different interviewing techniques, this study underlines that the approach used is inspired by theories that consider person-centered and active listening as the key principles of the supportive relationship, or a relationship where at least one of the protagonists aims at promoting growth, development, maturity, and achieving a more adequate and integrated way of behaving. In other words, a supportive relationship could be defined as a situation where one of the participants tries to encourage, on one or both sides, greater enhancement of the person's resources and a greater possibility of expression [30].

At an operational level, the methods for carrying out the interview reflected the specific purposes of each stage of the recognition process by adopting a different modulation of styles: from the person-centered style of the initial stage to the encouragement of the person's free expression, to a progressively more explicit and authentic formulation of his biography, until reaching a semistructured interview in the final stage aimed at documenting and selecting competences for validating them [31].

The procedure for the recognition of competences was structured in closely related stages.

2.2.1. Stage 0: Preparation of the Recognition Procedure

It can be defined as an activity of Stage 0 despite the fact that it does not really belong to the recognition procedure because it consists of a stage aimed at preparing the path for the advisors of the recognition procedure's users. The advisors are experts in tutoring and specially trained for this purpose. Two information and training meetings were scheduled with the group of advisors (composed of 13 experts) in order to analyze in detail the overall structure of the recognition tool and to facilitate the homogeneous and contemporary start of the process.

It was, therefore, necessary to think about the meaning of the key competences by examining those that emerged during the qualitative and quantitative research survey, and to share the tools to be used during the tutoring procedure.

2.2.2. Stage 1: Information

The objectives of this stage carried out within small groups led by the advisor can be summarized as introducing the participants in the recognition paths and in providing them with all necessary information about the recognition process.

The first contact is fundamental since the person's impact with the organization that provides for the recognition service is fundamental as well. For this reason, the work carried out by the tutor is crucial because he encourages the creation of a context based on trust and free expression.

The effectiveness of the advisor's professional and technical performance can be influenced by the relationship established from the first moments and by the added value of listening skills. Only by understanding the user's needs and emotions through active and involved listening is it possible to keep under control the distortion elements of the common work between the advisor and the user such as: passive attitude, addiction, delegation to the advisor, self-belittlement, and a feeling of not being able to go on with the path, magical, or psychotherapeutic expectations.

Before the first stage, a Curriculum Vitae in European format was sent together with a motivational letter and a short biography (maximum 600 words) where the applicant retraces and summarizes the most significant steps of his life related to the third sector, as well as the turning points in his work experience, including satisfactions, troubles, hopes, and prospects.

During a one-to-one session with the advisor in charge of the recognition path, the aforementioned application was then analyzed in order to verify the applicant's actual interest in the recognition process and collect more detailed information about the recipient and his expectations and investigate eventual ambivalent reasons or unrealistic expectations.

At the end of this one-to-one session, an agreement was signed in order to formalize the mutual commitment, verify and share intent, and make decisions between the advisor and the user. The agreement was signed only after providing the applicant with all of the information, characteristics, purposes, and methods of the path needed for involved participation and, consequently, his full collaboration and interaction.

2.2.3. Stage 2: Reconstruction of Experiences

The second stage was also crucial for the whole process. The aim was to bring out and identify the available competences by reconstructing and analyzing the education and work experiences and by selecting the most significant life experiences, with particular attention to motivations, values, activities, and competences related to the on-going experiences in the third sector.

Given the nature of the competences in question, it was necessary to check the existing elements by encouraging and accompanying the free narration of the experiences as to how and where they were acquired in order to recognize them later through their description and decoding according to more structured criteria which were present in the repertoire.

To achieve these objectives, various tools were used in order to encourage the users to progressively acquire experience in terms of elaboration and assessment by cross-checking and by self or heterogeneous evaluation of the strengths and successes of both their work- and nonworking experiences [23]. This method also encouraged the ability to create relationships with others according to an assessment scale and to clarify values relating to the activity carried out within the third sector in order to better understand motivating factors and to avoid stereotypes. It also helped to identify the competences developed in all of the activities that require a structured commitment outside of the working context as an opportunity to focus those competences that are sometimes underestimated.

2.2.4. Stage 3: Documents about the Key Competences

The aim of this stage was to clarify and to give value not only to all of the competences acquired, but also to give voice, rebuild, and explain the acquisition process of these competences. This means going beyond the person's free narration about what was done and encouraging him to think about his own actions, about the know-how and the learning acquired and used in integrated ways, and about the use of available resources.

Such activity was limited to the competences referred to by the destination profile described among the sections of the key competence's repertoire. To this end, two tools were used (Description of competences and Summary description datasheet) in order to understand what was learned by reconstructing the experiences in terms of know-how and competences, starting from the definition of competence as a dynamic, recursive, and emerging concept.

By describing the actions and activities carried out by the person, the Description of Competences will allow him to start an analysis and synthesis process that breaks down and divides the competences according to the different resources constituting them (knowledge, knowing how to do, knowing how to behave, knowing how and the willingness to act) and to assess the mastery level of these competences through a self-assessment nourished by elements of reflection.

The Synthetic description datasheet is a reasoned description of the most significant experiences that support the person's competences. It consists of selecting and choosing the most representative and emblematic activities that make the competences become concrete by applying and interpreting them according to the context where they were applied, the duration of their application, the autonomy level, as well as the problem-solving competences. All this starts from the logic of, "I do" or, "I've done" and not from, "I must do".

The last stage consists of drawing up a portfolio of competences by gathering and selecting the evidence to support the effective implementation of the identified competences [29].

The purpose of the portfolio is to make a comparison between the competences developed through experience and those expected from the portfolio of key competences. It is a reasoned collection of documents that starts from the description and explanation of the experiences, and from the analysis of the activities that make them concrete.

3. Results

The following sections report the analysis of data collected from the questionnaire and focus groups. They also describe how key competences are interpreted by third sector professionals and discuss the data taken from the tutors' reports about the procedures utilized for the recognition of key competences.

3.1. Statistical Survey about the Working Life of Third Sector Professionals

The questionnaire was sent to 289 professionals whose complete profiles were present in the database provided by FNTS. The response rate was 49%.

The sample profile consists mainly of men from two age groups, under 50 and over 50 years of age. Half of the sample has a university education while a third has a secondary school level of education.

The participants' daily work is focused on various activities: a total of 43% spends time in meetings with both internal and external people, a topic we will deal with later: 23% and 20% respectively. A total of 17% are in general accounting operations, while at the opposite extreme there are fundraising activities to finance the organization (10%). During the interview, the topic of fundraising was further dealt with by focusing on the range of tools the third sector managers and executives rely more on in order to finance the activities of their associations.

From this point of view, the answers provided by the sample outline a framework where it is possible to identify two different behaviors, transversal to the age (under-50, over-50) and the role of the interviewee in the organization chart:

- The first behavior is based on more traditional tools (funds/public notices, agreements with the public administration, agreements with foundations) which are particularly spread (the percentage of use by the sample goes from 44% to 76%) and often decisive for the financial portfolio.
- The second behavior includes more innovative tools (stakeholders' networks, markets/solidarity dinners, crowdfunding), valid for the fundraising strategy only for a small share of the sample (both in terms of use and financing of the activities).

The topic of communication was dealt with on several occasions due to its multiple aspects and variations, both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view, and it focused on languages, interlocutors, strategies, times, and places. It referred firstly to the specific competences declared by the interviewees in two increasingly essential types of modern communication: information technology and foreign languages.

By definition, the communication must be carried out by an interlocutor who is equally internal and external to the organization or body to which he belongs.

The answers provided by the sample clearly highlight the predominant national origin of the public relations: the frequency of participation in meetings, debates, and round tables is, in fact, much higher if the interlocutors are third sector players (67% of last year's sample), or local authorities/public administration (59%); on the other hand, the relations with external subjects are definitely more sporadic, with frequent participation in meetings and debates with representatives of the European and international institutions slightly exceeding 10% of the sample (consistent figure, among other things, with non-negligible language barriers in terms of personal competences).

The issues discussed so far have a common feature since they can be all traced back to the more personal dimension of the governance and managerial activity of managers/executives: from everyday work to linguistic and information technology skills, and to public relations networks.

In the theoretical reference framework of this survey, however, a relevant share of competences goes beyond the personal sphere and involves the whole organization as well as the staff of the organization.

Overall, the best performances in terms of percentages of highly satisfied and quite satisfied managers/executives are represented by the enhancement of human resources and the staff's behaviors. On the other hand, communication management is the area where self-assessments are lower on average despite being positive, and in this sense, it represents the most critical area identified by the interviewees as well as an essential target of strategies and paths to improve the group competences and the performance of internal organization structures.

The personal and group competences reported so far are made up of lights and shadows, strengths and weaknesses, and are included in a decision-making and governance context where tradition and innovation tend to coexist.

3.2. Nature and Impact of Key Competences

The focus groups were attended by people belonging to the same organizational context under various forms such as charitable organizations and social promotion and cooperation associations.

Eleven focus groups were set up and implemented in 11 regions: 85 regional managers mainly from the north participated (49.4%). The participants were mainly men (62.4%) over 50 (65.8%), with a 37.6% share over 60. The participants' repartition by organization type shows the prevalence of social promotion associations (45.9%) followed by charity organizations (24.7%).

In order to analyze the data that emerged from these 11 focus groups, the information was statistically processed and a data matrix was elaborated through the program IBM-Spss (version 24). For each of the 85 subjects interviewed, the following variables were stored in the matrix: survey date, place, region, territorial division, interviewee's gender and age, organization membership, and type of organization they belong to.

Furthermore, some descriptions were drawn up for each area of expertise, also based on their importance (two preferences).

The following statistical processing was carried out on this data matrix:

- Simple frequency repartition (general and percentage frequencies) for all variables;
- Multiple frequency tables for each area (i.e., tables considering all preferences expressed for the area);
- Double frequency tables of the first and second most important preference for each area;
- Double tables of the first preference for each area, respectively, analyzed according to the territory, gender, and type of organization.

The processing mentioned above allowed for analyzing the areas of key competences and attributing them with the underlying behaviors and knowledge and, for each area, the level of preference was characterized by the two competences considered the most important (first and second

most important options) according to the interviewed subjects. Furthermore, the most important competence was compared by territorial, gender, and type of organization breakdown.

Therefore, the general result was a range of key competences split into five areas. Each area is made up of some particular knowledge, skills, and behaviors:

- Managerial and leadership competences: Knowledge of the sector; Human and financial resource management; Knowledge of the organization of the reference sector; Knowledge of the legislation of the reference sector; Data management; Economic procurement skills; IT skills; Ethics.
- Personal and social competences: Adaptability; Orientation to the result; Spirit of initiative; Awareness of the organization; Construction and development of a shared vision with the associates; Accurate self-assessment; Management of feelings.
- Team and network competences: Shared view of mission; Shared communication code and language; Cooperation with other public and private entities.
- Change management competences: Full mastery of reference sector legislation- Knowledge of the changes taking place in the sector both at the global and local level; Knowledge of the players in the field and of their strategies; Knowledge of the specific change and innovation dynamics.
- Communication competences: Analysis and synthesis skills; Clear and structured expression; Mastery of communication times; Contextualization of the communication; Adaptation to multicultural contexts; Expression appropriate to the interlocutor and to the communication context; Availability to listen and make comparisons; Constructive attitude; Enhancement of the most functional skills in the reference context.

The most frequent competences chosen in the first area, i.e., the two more utilized by the interviewees, are the vision, defined as the skill of building a common ideal (28.2%), and the knowledge of the reference sector organization (24.7%).

In the area of personal and social competences, the two most frequently options chosen, i.e., the most frequently used, are the construction and development of a shared vision (30.6%) and organizational awareness (20%).

As for the third area, the cooperation competence was the first choice (43.5%), i.e., the most utilized one, while the shared mission competence was the second choice (37.6%).

In the area of change management competences, the first choice was the knowledge of changes taking place (38.8%), and the second one was the full knowledge of regulations (23.5%).

As for the fifth area, the availability to listen and to make comparisons (27.1%), as well as analysis and synthesis skills, (22.4%) were noted.

The identified areas represent an integrated whole as a constellation in which the different competences interact.

Personal/social competences are conceived as positive behaviors that allow individuals to effectively face the needs and challenges of daily life; the ability to maintain relationships with others, maintaining an empathic, open attitude, respecting values and points of view even if they come from a different culture. They also include availability and flexibility in the face of new situations.

Team and collective competences mainly rely on having the ability to work in a network, in local networks of services, and in social networks. The characteristics of the collective competences of a team are related to the development of a common operational framework; that is, having a common representation of the problems to deal with.

Change management and leadership competences make it possible to deal effectively with changes, using systems analysis strategies, needs assessment, and statistical data. They also include the ability to adapt the management style to the context and individual characteristics of the collaborators.

Communication competences highlight the ability to express oneself in a clear, structured way; to know how to listen and confront in a constructive way; to know how to adapt one's communication to the context.

3.3. Results of the Competences Recognition Procedure

This section deals with the results of the competences recognition procedure, by using the qualitative data reported on the tutors' diaries.

Being a narrative tool, the tutor's diary supported the identification process which allowed not only to monitor the progress made but also to leave some space for reflection, learning assessment, and self-assessment. By describing each activity proposed by the tutor, the diary helped to re-elaborate and systematize the material that emerged from the different stages and meetings with the participants, thus encouraging the recreation of the overall and general framework of such activity, as well as the reconstruction of the identification process. When writing this diary, the tutors had some time to explain their ideas and thoughts, highlight eventual difficulties, and move ahead in their relationships with the different users to become more aware of the changes to be made.

The tutor's orientation allowed a consistent percentage of participants (50 out of 60) to complete the competences documentation procedure. The participants who did not complete the procedure made this decision after the activities of the information stage and once they understood that they were not adequately motivated to go on with this experience.

The tutor's diary shows that the tools used, typical of the *bilan des compétences*, facilitated the recognition and transparency of competences. The greater awareness of oneself, of one's own competences and of personal and external constraints, as well as the stronger motivation in getting involved, were recurring elements and conditions which supported the users autonomously and securely dealing with the analysis and reconstruction of competences. A total of 78% of the users declared having developed a greater awareness of their competences and potential, while all the participants believed they acquired a greater ability to think about themselves and their own perspectives.

In terms of efficacy, the *bilan des compétences* was a suitable tool to go more into depth and discover a patrimony of acquisitions far richer than ever imagined by the users when they started the procedure. By describing and reconstructing their own life, training, and professional experiences, the users were able to identify those competences, even tacit ones which, although not formalized, belong to their knowledge. In 80% of cases, experiential learning was identified, translated into key competences, and reported in the portfolio.

In line with the model of *bilan des compétences* aimed at strengthening reflection and planning potential, tutoring was also useful to start thinking about the need for the constant maintenance of competences, and, therefore, about the need to plan lifelong learning paths.

4. Discussion

The description of the research activities and the analysis of its results highlight the importance of adopting the logic of competences for innovating the third sector organization processes and of using a pedagogical approach for the tutoring activity of competences recognition.

The widespread literature in the fields of politics, sociology, and economics calls on the need for meaning-making as a strategy for dealing with complexity, and more generally, facing present and future social challenges [32,33].

Internationally, the importance of noncognitive competencies determining success in life is widely recognized [34].

Key competences focus on the learner because of the importance of motivation, volition, and critical reflection on one's own learning experience [35]. Key competences can be considered as strategic competences for individuals. They mobilize the energies of individuals and proactive behaviors for lifelong learning. This in turn provides people with the tools they need to adapt to the challenges of ever-changing global societies [36].

Following Le Boterf, key competences do not lie in the resources of individuals, but rather in the actual process of mobilization of such resources [37].

The results of the research showed that the issue of competence recognition is closely linked on the one hand to the macrosystemic dimension of governance and policies for the complete implementation of a system for validating and certifying competences. On the other hand, to the pedagogical dimension of the tools and methods suitable for carrying out actions relating to the processes of competences training and enhancement.

As far as policies are concerned, at the end of the research regarding the policies adopted at the political and institutional levels in Europe and Italy, an emerging need in Italy for policies relating to two specific areas of intervention was highlighted: the complete implementation of the Italian national system for the certification of competences regarding the implementation of territorial networks of which the FNTS must be an integral part in the development perspective of LLL, and the enhancement of the human and social capital through the enhancement of LLL and the processes of recognition and validation of learning and competences acquired in nonformal and informal areas, specifically in the working contexts of the third sector.

The FNTS will have to refer to a new regulatory framework introduced in Italy by the recent Law No. 92 of 2012 to set the founding principles of its mission, to draw up an education path and services consistent with this Law. Pursuant to Article 4 paragraphs 51–58 of this same Law, it is important to implement suitable tutoring and consultancy services dedicated to the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the recognition process of prior learning and; therefore, the procedures of the organizations associated with the FNTS should be substantially consistent with the service provided in order to guarantee transparency and fairness to all citizens concerned on the national territory and to support the processes activated in the various organizational contexts of the FNTS. In this regard, the Italian Guidelines approved by the Italian government in January 2020, in line with European guidelines for the validation of nonformal and informal learning, represent a practical tool to support innovation in this area also on from the organizational point of view. The adoption of guidelines to guarantee the procedures quality, transparency, and fairness at a national level will allow serious and rigorous implementation of the recognition processes in terms of efficacy, efficiency, quality, and sustainability of the services to be provided [14].

As far as the method and procedure are concerned, the most interesting results deal with two elements that highlight some critical issues. The first refers to the fact that the research substantially confirms the need to adopt a tool providing services and pedagogical support to the beneficiaries in order to prepare the necessary documentation for the portfolio [16]. The second relates to the need to change the perspective for building and defining the competences development actions by adopting the logic of learning outcomes [17].

Research methods on adulthood are more and more converging toward qualitative models applied to human growth in a complex society, to the extension of the acknowledged relevance of experiential approach, of biographies as resources for development. These are cultural and scientific tendencies emphasizing the components regarding the subjective creation of meaning and the generative value of actions, and going beyond the restricted limits resulting from the adoption of the functional rationality paradigm, which assesses human actions merely in terms of efficacy and effectiveness.

The pedagogical tools aimed to transform individual experiences into conscious, reflective, proactive acquisitions, and learning. The focus is on the human capability to generate and use knowledge effectively, intelligently, creatively, and proactively. In today's knowledge society, individuals, with their set of knowledge and competencies, are the actual treasure for themselves and for the community.

Pedagogical tools develop reflective practices based on specific criteria such as organizational autonomy, biographical improvisation, learning interdependence, creative leadership. They are guidance tools applied usually to support transitions of individuals toward the education and job market. The pedagogical tools pattern envisages autobiographical phase (such as life-history and narrative interview), and can be applied to adult learners with the purpose of reinforcing their capacity of reflection on their educational and work paths/experiences, and of developing critical and proactive

thinking on their life experience. Such tools have proved to possess a strong educational value and very good didactic potentiality for the development of reflectiveness, or of reflective thinking.

Here some of the main problems for classifying the recognition and validation process are highlighted. This process initially requires a cultural transformation of the almost exclusive definition of training in terms of disciplinary content and, secondly the training of competent people to perform the delicate and rigorous task of activating recognition and validation tools. A new professional should be able to:

- Define the learning outcomes and professional standards;
- Use tutoring pedagogical methods;
- Assess the competences portfolio;
- Prepare functional strategies for connecting the FNTS services and managing the information and administrative functions of the validation process.

5. Conclusions

In order to support the FNTS innovation processes during this important stage of governance redefinition, the principles and actions needed for the recognition and validation process must find suitable space in organizing its missions and in defining the training and organizing of services. Indeed, there is no doubt that the quality of services currently provided is closely related to the enhancement of human resources that are part of various organizational contexts in a lifelong perspective [38].

The results of the research relating to the identification of operational procedures aimed at guaranteeing the rigor, transparency, and effectiveness of the processes implemented can usefully contribute to creating shared paths among the FNTS and the external players interested in the territorial networks (professional associations, companies, trade unions, regions, schools, universities, etc.) [39,40]. Such shared paths are aimed at both implementing the competences' certification processes concerning highly qualified professionals and at defining a range of competences that are coded by regional and/or national standards that can facilitate the recognition and the validation of the competences used to enhance the cultural and professional heritage and also for their eventual return to training and education paths.

In this sense, a future line of research concerns the study and the recognition of the transversal competences of civil service volunteers. The civil service represents an important opportunity of training and personal and professional growth for young people who are an indispensable and vital resource for the cultural, social, and economic progress of the country.

The above results highlight the crucial role of the university and the FNTS in the successful and qualitative implementation of an Italian system for lifelong learning and competence certification. Both consider society and organizations as communities that can perceive, understand, and generate innovation by focusing on the value of different cultural expressions and on the universal importance of human rights. Therefore, they are learning communities that, from cultural, social, economic, political, and territorial points of view, effectively involve all the subjects who can contribute to creating a lifelong learning and competence certification system [41].

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