



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

A Look at MAD Teachers: Conscious Precariousness and Willingness to Teach

Ivan Blancato, Gianluca Argentin***

Author information

- * Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy
Email: ivan.blancato@unimib.it
- ** Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy
Email: gianluca.argentin@unimib.it

Article first published online

March 2025

HOW TO CITE

Blancato I., Argentin G. (2025) "A Look at MAD Teachers: Conscious Precariousness and Willingness to Teach" *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 17(1), 155-176.
DOI: [10.25430/pupj-IJSE-2025-1-8](https://doi.org/10.25430/pupj-IJSE-2025-1-8)

A Look at MAD Teachers: Conscious Precariousness and Willingness to Teach

Ivan Blancato, Gianluca Argentin

Abstract: In recent years, challenges in teacher recruitment have increasingly been addressed using extraordinary hiring mechanisms, which have led to significant instability in this occupational sector. Among these alternative mechanisms, in Italy, we find the *Messa A Disposizione* – commonly referred to as MAD –, a recruitment channel provided by the legislator as a flexible solution to meet the demand for teachers. Despite the extensive use of MAD by schools, yet there is limited knowledge about the characteristics of the thousands of individuals working in the school system through this contract. Our research contributes to the broader field of Sociology of Education by shedding light on how flexible recruitment mechanisms, such as MAD, influence teacher precarity and the overall stability of the school system. We focus on this subpopulation of temporary teachers, outlining their main characteristics and investigating these teachers' motivations to teach and long-term related perspectives, through an online questionnaire, filled by over four hundred MAD teachers. The sociodemographic profile of the sample can be summarized by one general term: heterogeneity. For most respondents, MAD is not an instrumental and planned choice to temporally teach while developing another career; at the opposite, most of them are oriented toward a permanent integration in the school system, considering MAD a teaching experience, while completing their professional development in this direction. Future lines of investigation and policy implications are discussed.

Keywords: Teachers, Precariousness, Motivations, Job Satisfaction

Introduction

This research is situated within the broader framework of the Sociology of Education, which has long examined issues related to teacher recruitment and precariousness in the Italian context, characterized both by high presence of substitute teachers and uncertain path to a permanent position in the school system (Colombo et al. 2016; Gremigni, 2013; Magni, 2019).

The aim of this paper is investigating *Messa A Disposizione* (hereafter referred to as MAD), an alternative and flexible recruitment channel for teachers in the Italian school system. More precisely we try to fill the existing knowledge gap regarding the population of teachers entering the school system through this channel: at the moment, almost nothing is known about them. We aim to understand how this form of flexibilization in the recruitment process works and with what consequences on individuals and on the school system itself.

What is interesting about MAD is its extreme flexibility as a hiring tool available to public schools operating in the Italian education system, characterized by a rigid recruitment system based on national concourses (occurring with unpredictable timing) for permanent contracts and a wide set of bureaucratic procedures for temporary (typically annual) contracts, assigned at local level and, afterwards, distributed among schools. Moreover, the history of the Italian recruitment system in schools adds layers of complexity: different temporary contracts and individual rankings coexist and frequently there are changes in the rules, aimed to facilitate the ones having already had previous experience in the schools. Overall, all this led to the emergence of fragmented, diverse, and uncertain pathways for permanently entering the school system.

Within this framework, MAD is a form of extremely flexible hiring because the application for teaching is submitted online directly by candidates to schools, whereby aspiring teachers make themselves available to be called upon when needed. Moreover, school principals directly select teachers, without the intervention of other national or local offices of the Ministry of education. In this sense, MAD represents an element of autonomy for schools, the need for which is often underlined in order to guarantee the quality of the school system (Ribolzi, 2014). Nonetheless, the ones recruited through MAD are employed on fixed-term contracts, displaying economic conditions similar to any other substitute teacher. A significant point to note is that even individuals who are not qualified to teach can submit a MAD application. As a result, the most frequently cited concern regarding MAD teachers is the potential risk of their lack of preparation and unsuitability for the role they are called to fill (Ferrero, 2023; Toscano & Verduci, 2023). In this sense, it is useful to recall Ribolzi's (2003) perspective, expressed well before

the introduction of highly specific tools such as MAD. In her reflections, the author highlights the importance of two factors closely connected to the quality of education systems: on the one hand, initial teacher training and in-service professional development; on the other, the motivational aspect, which will be largely discussed in this paper.

Although it is often portrayed as a recent measure, introduction of MAD dates back almost fifteen years. MAD was initially introduced as an exceptional and, therefore, *extra-ordinary* tool, to be used as a reserve resource in specific situations of teacher shortages, such as the temporary unavailability of a tenured teacher. Over the years, MAD gained space in the recruitment system, and this is the reason why it is thought to be recent. In 2020, CISL, a National Trade Union, estimated a total of 15,000 MAD contracts for the 2019/2020 school year (FLC CGIL, 2020). However, the data sources to get this information were not cited, nor were the methodological choices underlying the estimate specified. Despite its “success”, there have been a few (but limited) ministerial guidelines regarding MAD.

At the opposite, MAD has been viewed more and more frequently as a useful tool to address the many critical situations stemming from teacher shortages in hard to staff schools (Ferrero, 2023). Therefore, MAD seems nowadays a bridge to close the gap between the demand for teachers and the supply of teachers, in difficult contexts. As Santiago (2004) pointed out, it is natural for the teacher labour market to have a pool of teachers to draw from in specific circumstances, such as the temporary unavailability of a permanent teacher. Following this perspective, MAD may serve as a temporary and flexible solution to meet the demand for teachers where necessary.

It is important to highlight the complete lack of statistical data regarding the use of MAD, and the resulting shortage of information about the characteristics of the individuals who rely on it to teach. Schools employ internal platforms exclusively to track MAD hirings, and they are not required to share this information with the Education Ministry’s offices. Additionally, the variable duration of the contracts makes it difficult to clearly quantify the number of MAD teachers, as this figure may change depending on when it is measured. As a result, it is impossible to know the actual extent to which schools utilize MAD and we also do not know anything about the profile of teachers recruited through MAD. In essence, despite the widespread use of MAD by schools in recent years, nothing is known about the characteristics of the thousands of individuals working in the school system through this channel. This paper aims at filling both these gaps.

First and foremost, we consider it crucial to assess the composition of this specific subgroup of teachers. Describing the sociodemographic characteristics of those working via MAD in Italian schools is useful for grasping their position within the broader teaching body.

Secondly, it is important to explore the motivations driving these teachers to enter the school system. Although they find themselves in a state of employment discontinuity, we know nothing about their reasons for choosing to teach and for using the MAD. With respect to the school system, they may be transient workers or, conversely, people intending to get a permanent teaching position. These two scenarios may have totally different repercussions both on individuals and on the entire school system. Indeed, studies indicate that teachers' motivations and goals play a critical role in determining their job satisfaction (Gerosa, 2014). Additionally, systemic implications are also evident: high teacher turnover negatively affects school stability and student learning (Abbiati et al., 2021). Moreover, at system level, reliance on fixed-term contracts imposes a considerable financial burden on public resources (Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2013).

This paper seeks to address the questions listed above by presenting a recent study that involved interviewing a sample of MAD teachers.

The following sections will provide a theoretical framework to contextualize the chosen research field (par.2, par.3). The methodology section will then outline the data collection and analysis tools used (par.4). Next, the results of the survey will be presented and discussed to answer the research questions (par.5, par.6). Finally, the paper will reflect on the limitations of this study and its potential future developments (par.7).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Teachers labour market

The labour market for teachers represents the complex system within which these professionals operate and carry out their work. First, this system is significant due to its substantial size. As shown by data published by the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM, 2024), there were over 930,000 teachers in Italy during the 2022/2023 school year. Of these, more than 70% were permanently employed, while around 235,000 were substitute teachers. These figures, however, are underestimates, as they do not account for the wide variety of teacher categories within the Italian school system. Accurately mapping and counting teachers hired for short-term contracts—typically less than a full school year—is particularly challenging (Argentin, 2018; 2021a). Therefore, a lot of teachers hired through the MAD are also not included in this Ministry's data, which only counts teachers on contracts lasting for the school year.

The labour market for teachers is also central because it directly impacts the quality of the public education system. A school system that succeeds in attracting “the best candidates”—those who are well-qualified and trained—

will see improved outcomes both systemically and in the quality of education offered (Chevalier & Dolton, 2004; Santiago, 2004; OECD, 2005). Regarding this aspect, previous analysis highlights a critical situation in Italy: in various disciplinary fields, the higher the degree grade, the lower the inclination to enter teaching (Argentin, 2018). In other words, “the best” are not drawn to the school system and prefer to work elsewhere.

In this context, teacher recruitment systems play a crucial role, being the institutions attracting and selecting teachers. The term “recruitment system” refers to the set of rules, guiding principles and pathways that define the qualifications and competencies required to become a teacher and, thus, regulate the selection and entry process for teachers into the labour market. In Italy, teacher recruitment systems have been widely studied, particularly due to their unique characteristics. Gargiulo (2017) emphasises the presence of very different routes into the teaching profession. In brief, the first of these frameworks, the public concourse, has only been used sparingly over the years: from the mid-20th century to today, only eight full public concourses—based both on exams and certifications—have taken place (Bertagna, 2020). By contrast, numerous special and extraordinary laws opened alternative pathways for entering teaching, generating various teachers’ rankings and pre-service qualifications, each governed by different mechanisms¹. Overall, almost all candidates to teach start their career with fixed-term contracts. Candidates are selected from multiple channels following a hierarchical order among different rankings: if candidates are unavailable in one, selection moves to the next. Finally, schools may turn to MAD as a last resort. Hence, this paper is focused on the ones getting a teaching position because all other candidates were already assigned to a position or not available: this implies that there is the risk of finding in our sample people non-qualified to teach and instrumentally passing through the education system.

The recent Eurydice Report (2021) highlights data on precarious employment across European school systems, revealing a particularly critical situation in Italy: less than 75% of Italian teachers hold permanent contracts, compared to a European average above 82%. Fifteen European countries surpass Italy’s percentage by at least ten points. Moreover, Italy, like Portugal and Spain, has notably high percentages of temporary teachers even among older age groups; 32% of teachers between ages 35 and 49 in Italy are employed on temporary contracts, nearly twice the European average. This

¹ The teacher recruitment system in Italy currently provides for two channels for recruitment on open-ended contracts: the ordinary competition, on a national scale; the *Graduatorie a Esaurimento*, lists made up of qualified individuals who can be selected on the basis of a score, calculated on seniority in teaching and family responsibilities. If there are not enough candidates in these two channels, the system activates extraordinary mechanisms to recruit teachers, such as the MAD examined in this paper.

situation indicates a structural precariousness of considerable scale with a substantial share of non-young individuals affected. In fact, approximately a quarter of Italy's precarious teachers are over forty-five years old (Argentin, 2018).

The Consequences of Precarious Employment in Schools

Both policy choices and structural issues within the recruitment system (Gremigni, 2013) have led to an extensive reliance on alternative and instrumental hiring channels, resulting in a significant increase in temporary teachers hired through fixed-term contracts. A labour market that heavily relies on temporary contracts—sometimes even for very short durations—leads inevitably to a pervasive condition of precarious employment.

The concept of precarious employment is explored in depth by Berton and colleagues (2009). They define it as a condition of individual risk, which can negatively impact various aspects of daily life, including personal planning and social relationships. Several factors contribute to the precarious nature of employment, with one of the primary ones being employment discontinuity. Within schools, this category includes short-term substitutes who, according to many researchers, are in the most disadvantaged position. In example, Gremigni (2013) specifically refers to this group of teachers in her work titled "Institutionalized Precariousness", aimed at highlighting the uncertainty these people are called to face and the resulting implications for their lives.

On an individual level, one significant correlate of precarious employment is the issue of geographic mobility, a longstanding challenge in Italian education. Colucci and Gallo (2017) describe the dynamics that compel teachers (and aspiring teachers) to move from one province, and often even one region, to another in order to secure a contract. This massive migration is not new in the Italian labour market for teachers (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2009) and it is due to structural imbalances between teaching positions and job offers among macro-regions, imposing long distance migration to the ones beginning their teachers' career. This situation is especially negative for teachers hired only for short periods, forcing them into a cycle of constant relocation. D'Onofrio (2017) highlights that the nature of substitute teaching frequently makes it difficult to build stable personal and professional relationships.

Teachers in precarious employment situations are by no means a homogenous group; they vary in terms of educational qualifications, certifications, competitive exams completed, professional experience within schools, and career aspirations. Yet, the complexity of the school system and the rules governing access often amplify these differences, leading to significant stratification within the teaching workforce (Carbone & Gargiulo, 2022).

The concept of civic stratification by Lockwood (1996), along with Morris's (2003) additional insights, aptly describes this situation. Essentially, within the school system, varying rules for access and transitions result in teachers who occupy different levels within the economic and occupational hierarchy, regardless of individual motivations; this affects professional and social recognition as well.

Beyond these dynamics, it's essential to consider that the temporary contracts of many teachers impact also stakeholders of the school system. The high teachers' precariousness leads to substantial turnover within schools and classrooms, since the longest temporary contract last one year. Abbiati and colleagues (2021) reveal that this constant teacher turnover significantly affects students, due to the instructional discontinuity. Moreover, this negative effect on students' learning is associated to socioeconomic background: families of higher socioeconomic status are better equipped to mitigate the issues stemming from instructional discontinuity.

Additionally, Barbieri and Sestito (2017) highlight that Italian schools with high teacher turnover often face challenging conditions. These schools tend to have a higher turnover among permanent staff and, consequently, a greater reliance on temporary teachers. The implications for other school actors, though not explored in depth here, are still noteworthy: fewer stable relationships with students' parents; reduced collegiality, with more severe difficulties for fellow teachers; additional workload for principals and administrative staff, who are continually tasked with recruiting and formalizing new contracts. Moreover, recent research has shown a relationship between classes with a high presence of students with a migrant background and the presence of precarious teachers (Antonini et al, forthcoming). Precarious employment thus emerges as a significant issue, both for students and school organizations, particularly in disadvantaged settings, potentially reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. This appears to be a contributing mechanism underlying tertiary effects in education (Argentin & Pavolini, 2020).

Within this framework of precariousness, it is important to note that temporary employment does not always impose a burden on individuals. Indeed, in some cases, signing temporary contracts in the school system is a strategic personal choice. For instance, channels like the MAD described here may serve as job-shopping tools (Johnson, 1978), allowing individuals to enrich their résumés or test their fit to the teaching profession, before applying for that career. Gerosa (2014) highlights that temporary teachers who are still studying view fixed-term contracts as a choice and voluntarily opt for temporary employment, which sometimes leads even to higher job satisfaction, when compared to their permanently employed colleagues. This suggests that temporary contracts, while often a necessity, may sometimes serve also as a pathway for skill acquisition or personal exploration within

the teaching profession. Thus, motivation to a MAD position plays a crucial role: there are clear differences between those who choose to be precarious and those who are forced into this condition. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the motivations driving individuals towards teaching (Argentin, 2010).

Research Questions

In line with what has been illustrated so far, we believe it is important to study the MAD subpopulation of teachers. Indeed, as argued, MAD is used every school year by thousands of schools to hire teachers, but almost little is known about the characteristics, work trajectories, and professional backgrounds of this group.

The first objective of this contribution is to define the sociodemographic characteristics of MAD teachers (RQ1a), also assessing the similarities with the group of Italian substitute teachers (RQ1b). In this regard, we hypothesize finding a high number of support teachers² among the respondents (HP1). Indeed, national data (MIM, 2024) show that a large proportion of special education teachers are hired on fixed-term contracts: the use of alternative recruitment mechanisms for these roles appears to be almost a recurring practice. Furthermore, we wonder whether MAD represents for individuals a temporary and transitional job, or whether they intend it as a way to get closer to teaching for a future permanent entry into the school system. For this reason, we consider it essential to examine the educational and professional paths of these workers, as well as the motivations guiding them towards teaching and how they combine among MAD teachers (RQ2). More precisely, it is important to assess whether these teachers are “passing through” or intend to stay in the school.

Focusing these teachers allows us to formulate two alternative hypotheses regarding the functioning of the MAD contract (HP2). Is it a recruitment channel for future teachers, a gateway to the Italian school system? Or is the MAD merely a legal framework designed to facilitate the matching of labour supply and demand, offering temporary teaching positions to individuals who are actually pursuing other career paths?

This aspect has significant implications not only at system level (as argued above), but also for their job satisfaction (RQ3), potentially mitigating the negative consequences of their temporary contracts. In line with Gerosa’s (2014) findings, we hypothesize that individuals less inclined to pursue a career in teaching are more satisfied with their current profession (HP3): they may have voluntarily chosen to embrace a temporary occupation.

² Support teachers are assigned to classes in which there are pupils with disabilities or specific learning disorders. They work alongside the class teacher.

Methodology

Data

In an attempt to answer our research questions, we developed a survey administering a questionnaire to a sample of teachers, using a CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) methodology³. Data collection was conducted between December 2023 and January 2024, delivering a questionnaire through social networks, identified as the only feasible distribution channel for an unknown and hidden population⁴. For this reason, pages and groups dedicated to MAD on various social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Telegram) were identified. In these virtual spaces, a link to the questionnaire was shared, preceded by an explanatory message. The questionnaire was filled by a self-selected sample of 432 MAD teachers, namely people who were hired through this recruitment channel at least once in the previous two years. Since our sample is a convenience sample, attention must be paid to possible imbalances. To control for this risk, we compare our MAD sample to what is known about Italian substitute teachers, using recently published data from the MIM (2024). As shown above, our sample exhibits features similar to those of the overall substitute teacher population (see Results, RQ1b). The survey relied on a questionnaire⁵, consisting of forty questions of various types. Several components of the questionnaire were drawn from previous empirical research identified in the existing literature on the subject. The aim of this choice is to ensure accuracy in measuring the various dimensions. To gauge respondents' motivations for pursuing a teaching career, we used a set of thirteen items, inspired by the battery developed in the Third IARD Institute Survey on the Teaching Force (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010), with some modifications⁶. We also included a specific question aimed at understanding respondents' motivations for using the MAD as a teaching method. The questionnaire also assesses job satisfaction. We adopted here the scale used by ISTAT to measure the job satisfaction of Italian workers (ISTAT, 2024).

³ A pretest was conducted before the data collection phase: the questionnaire was thus tested with the help of teachers and fellow researchers. This step was useful both to test this newly created tool and to check its appropriateness for the target audience.

⁴ We remember that neither schools nor regional or national school offices keep track of MAD usage. Moreover, the intermittent employment status of these teachers makes it difficult to locate them in schools, as they often work for brief or sporadic periods. Consequently, probabilistic sampling was not feasible.

⁵ The following link allows to view a PDF version of the questionnaire:

^hhttps://drive.google.com/file/d/12KWX35Yr_2PTQX6RjH9yUwt77GSTKvfQ/view?usp=drive_link.

⁶ The original statements were adapted to be impersonal and free from any specific temporal reference. Additionally, an item was added to address the possibility of balancing teaching with other jobs.

For each aspect presented, respondents indicated their level of satisfaction on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (totally satisfied).

Statistical Methods

We analyse the collected data to answer the research questions both through univariate and bivariate descriptive statistics and multivariate regression models. To identify the motivational dimensions of teaching, we performed a principal component analysis (PCA) on the relevant set of items. Two items (teaching as a family tradition; ability to balance this occupation with other jobs) were excluded because they did not correlate with any component. Subsequently, three factors were identified⁷, each representing a specific motivational component. In line with Argentin's (2010) framework, we identified choices linked to professional aspirations, instrumental motivations, and those due to chance, connected to unplanned circumstances⁸. Based on these identified factors, we calculated additive indices for the items underlying each component (sum of the original values divided by the number of items). This approach maintained the indices on the same scale as the original values, ensuring straightforward data presentation.

Considering the three dimensions identified, we applied cluster analysis to our data to group individuals based on their motivations. First, we analysed the sociodemographic composition of the clusters to identify any notable characteristics. Then, we implemented multivariate regression models to examine the association between this motivational groups and several dimensions of job satisfaction, controlling for sample composition⁹.

⁷ Explained variance: 56.10%; minimum communality: 0.426; minimum factor loading: 0.569. Each item primarily associates with a single component. Items with the lowest factor loadings (0.569 and 0.601) relate to the third factor, which concerns motivations linked to chance.

⁸ Items for each component.

^Professional aspiration: Teaching as a professional aspiration; Interest in conveying the content of my field of study; To improve society; To work with young people

^Instrumental motivations: Prestige of the teaching profession; Lack of better job opportunities; To make use of my academic degree; Opportunity to supplement family income.

^Other motivations: By chance; Convenient working hours; Satisfaction after some substitute teaching experiences.

⁹ The models include control variables: gender, age, educational qualification, and macro-region of residence.

^The main limitation of this research stems from the sampling phase, not ensure a representative sample of the target population. On the other hand, our results, despite preliminary and exploratory, highlight potential directions for future research. On the other side, by collecting respondents' contact information, we incorporated a panel element into our research, to be assessed in terms of the potentiality of future longitudinal studies on teachers.

Results

Features of MAD Teachers

As anticipated, a first step in the data analysis phase involves examining the composition of the sample obtained, both to describe the MAD population (RQ1a) and to assess whether our sample looks highly biased, in comparison with what we know about teacher population (RQ1b).

Firstly, we observe a predominance of female respondents in the sample: 90.4% of the respondents identified as female¹⁰. This percentage varies across different school levels. In pre-primary and primary school, the percentage of female teachers exceeds 95%, while in secondary education this figure decreases: it is 70% in middle school and 80% in high school. This result is in line with data on Italian teachers, where female components predominant, though its concentration varies across different educational levels.

The MAD teachers interviewed do not form a completely homogeneous group in terms of age: younger teachers, under 29 years old, are predominant as we expected considering that MAD is usually the first step to access teaching, but there is also a significant portion of adults. Thus, the sample includes both young and more mature substitute teachers. Among younger individuals, we observe a noteworthy and distinctive presence of teachers under the age of 25. Due to the structure of study paths and teaching entry requirements, this age group is not commonly represented in the Italian teaching workforce. In contrast, MAD enables school employment for those who do not yet hold a teaching qualification or the corresponding educational credentials. Despite minor differences in the age brackets used in our questionnaire compared to those provided by the Ministry, we note a similar composition between the two datasets. A young component, under 30, is prevalent in both cases; however, in both samples, substitute teachers are present among the older age groups, above 45-50 years old. Our sample lacks individuals between 35 and 45 years old, unlike the MIM data. This may be due to a specific trend in MAD usage: according to our data, on one side, MAD is mainly used by young individuals, who have not yet found a stable job position, and on the other, by the older age group, which is likely to be composed of individuals who are called to change job during their working life. In any case, this result needs further consideration and investigations. Observing the distribution by school level, we find that more than half of the respondents (59.7%) teach (or have taught) through MAD at the primary school level. Another substantial group works in high schools, representing 17% of the total sample. The remaining respondents are equally divided

¹⁰ Very few individuals chose not to indicate their gender, an option provided in the questionnaire structure.

between pre-primary and middle school levels (each comprising 11% of the total sample). It is also possible to consider the geographic dimension of the phenomenon by examining the sample's territorial distribution.

Regarding the work setting, most respondents report working predominantly in Northern Italian regions. Conversely, when we look at the location where respondents obtained their degrees, we see more responses indicating provinces outside of the Northern regions. Also, these results are coherent with what we know about substitute teachers and their geographical mobility, reassuring about the goodness of the collected sample.

Finally, in terms of subjects taught, we can identify a significant presence of support teachers, reaching up to 50% of the total in some school levels, such as primary school. This aspect highlights a core issue within the Italian school system: recent data show a high prevalence of substitute teachers among special education staff (FLC CGIL, 2019; MIM, 2024).

MAD as a Professional Pathway

We focus now on the role that teachers associate with the MAD, investigating their educational and professional paths (RQ2).

Regarding educational qualifications, it is helpful to concentrate on those holding a master's degree, the foundational requirement to obtain a teaching credential; other specific qualifications, are added upon a tertiary degree, depending on the school level in question. In this context, 37% of respondents report not having earned a master's degree, holding instead a lower qualification. The remaining part of the sample obtained a master's degree and, in very few cases (2% of the total), a doctoral degree or a master. The latter, therefore, possess the minimum requirement to teach, unlike the former. At the same time, we note that 72.1% of those without a master's degree report currently studying to earn a degree. More generally, approximately 45% of respondents report studying at the time of the questionnaire. Therefore, nearly half of the respondents are students, mainly the younger ones in our sample. They may be studying to obtain a degree that would enable them to teach, or they may be studying with other objectives while using the MAD as a temporary job. However, more than half (54%) of the MAD teachers interviewed report that they did not possess the specific qualification required for the teaching subject in which they are (or have been) employed through the MAD. Thus, they find themselves teaching subjects for which they formally lack adequate preparation. Of these teachers, more than half indicate support teaching as their primary area. In fact, in the Italian school system, many support teachers are hired through fixed-term contracts (FLC CGIL, 2019).

These results require to understand what path MAD teachers envision for themselves, whether they consider a future inside or outside the school sys-

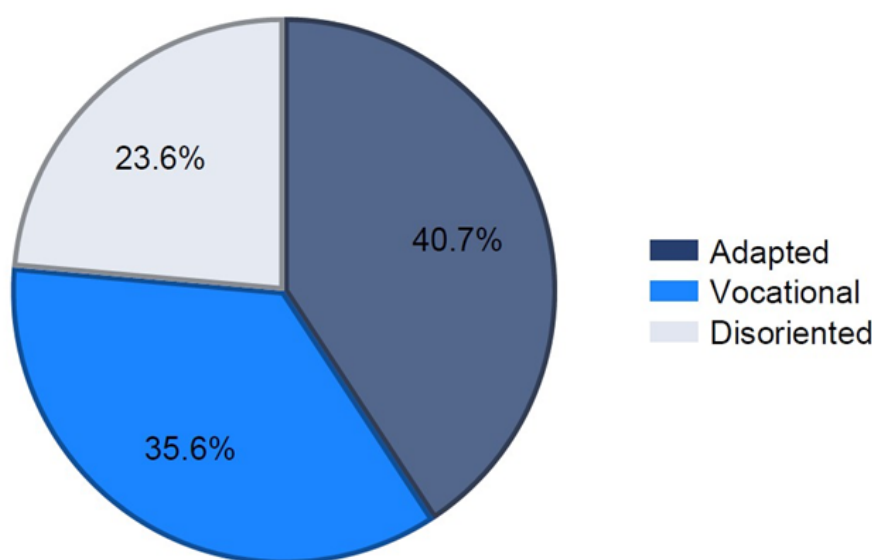
tem. Firstly, we note that just over half of the respondents (55.8%) at the time of completing the questionnaire stated that they were studying to obtain a teaching qualification or to participate to a public teaching concourse. This suggests a preliminary distinction: on the one hand, those who evidently want to enter the school system permanently; on the other, those who are not actively pursuing this goal. We also analysed responses to the question, “How interesting do you find the work of teaching?”. On a scale from 1 to 10, the average score observed was 9.03 (SD 1.29), indicating that respondents find the teaching profession extremely interesting. Only 11% of the sample provides an answer lower than the score of 7. This finding supports the idea of a strong inclination among these individuals toward teaching as a career. However, we cannot conclude that the latter are not interested in pursuing a teaching career based solely on these responses. Hence, we examined also the motivations for choosing to teach, namely the three motivational components identified through our scale: professional aspiration, instrumental motivations, and motivations linked to chance (non-motivations). We observe that the scores for the first of these dimensions are, on average, much higher than those for the other two. On a scale from 1 to 10, the average score indicating the weight of motivations related to professional aspiration is 8, with a standard deviation of 1.69. Conversely, the average score associated with instrumental motivations is 4.82 (sd 2.00), significantly lower than the previous one. Thus, respondents attribute their presence in the school system mainly to motivations tied to their inclination towards teaching. Chance-related motivations carry an average score of 5.78 (sd 2.05), indicating that accidental factors also impact the decision to teach, albeit less so than professional aspiration.

The overall picture becomes even clearer when examining the two main motivations that led respondents to use MAD¹¹. Specifically, 67% of respondents reported using MAD with the intention of gaining teaching experience. In contrast, only a small portion of MAD teachers (less than 8% of the sample) view this recruitment channel as a means for obtaining only a temporary or occasional job. Other two motivations were chosen quite frequently: the lack of career opportunities in previous jobs (indicated by 24% of the sample) and the need for financial support (22.9%). While these factors may suggest some extrinsic motivations, most respondents who chose these options also selected the option reflecting an intrinsic inclination toward teaching. Thus, the findings detected up to now seems to corroborate the idea that most MAD respondents display an explicit or implicit inclination to join the school system on a permanent basis. Based on motivational factors,

¹¹ Each respondent could select a maximum of two responses for this question: the response options were not mutually exclusive.

we identified three clusters of individuals: Adapted-instrumental, Disoriented-in progress, and Vocational-expressive¹². The *Vocational-expressive* group is characterized by individuals who cite aspiration as their sole motivation for entering teaching; the *Adapted-instrumental* group, who score high on both chance-related and aspirational motivations (suggesting that they may have arrived somewhat by chance, yet are now strongly motivated to teach); and the *Disoriented-in progress* group, marked by low average scores across all motivation categories, indicating that they may be uncertain about their commitment to teaching. Although this group is the smallest of the three, it represents a distinctive and not negligible minority within the sample.

Figure 1. Cluster distribution (percentage, n=432)



Upon analysing these groups, some socio-demographic differences emerged. Regarding age, the Vocational-expressive group is notable: 60% of individuals in this cluster are under 30 years old, while this percentage is below 45% in the other two groups. Thus, the prevalence of professional aspiration as a teaching motivation is mainly observed among younger individuals. This finding is directly linked to small differences observed in their educational qualifications: Vocational-expressive teachers represent the group with the highest percentage of individuals holding only a high school diploma and still studying.

¹² Average score for clusters (professional aspirations; instrumental motivations; motivations due to chance), on a 1-10 scale: Adapted-instrumental (respectively 8.76; 6.32; 7.24), Disoriented-in progress (respectively 5.70; 4.51; 5.84), Vocational-expressive (respectively 8.60; 3.31; 4.08).

MAD Precariousness and Job Satisfaction

By definition, MAD teachers are precarious, as they are employed under fixed-term contracts and experience employment discontinuity. However, it is valuable to examine their situation more in depth, considering that we identified highly varied situations among respondents (RQ3). First, there is significant variability in the duration of MAD contracts: some last only a few days, while others extend to the end of the school year. Among the MAD teachers who were working at the time of the survey (about 85% of the sample), only a small group (7% of the total) reported having a contract extending through the summer months until the end of the school year. On the other hand, 64% of respondents reported working until the end of the school activities, finishing in late June. Lastly, nearly one-third of those working through MAD are employed on short contracts, lasting only a few months, weeks, or days. The precariousness of MAD teachers is also reflected in their satisfaction for different features of their job. Examining the distribution of all the items comprising the job satisfaction scale (Table 1), not surprisingly we observe significantly lower scores in relation to job stability and career opportunities. On average, respondents are notably dissatisfied with these two aspects, which are fundamental in defining their precarious status. Correlating MAD teachers' contract durations and satisfaction about job stability and career opportunities shows that these dimensions are strongly interconnected: as the duration of the employment contract increases, satisfaction with these job characteristics also increases. On average, those with a short-term contract indicate lower values (job stability 3.06 and career opportunities 4.41). In contrast, satisfaction is higher among those who have a contract until the end of teaching activities (June) (respectively, 4.37 and 5.37) and, above all, those who have a contract that also covers the summer months (respectively, 5.19 and 6.27).

On the contrary, teachers appear on average very satisfied with other aspects of their job. Indeed, items related to extrinsic aspects of teaching show relatively high average values. In example, we highlight the aspects of working hours and the ability to balance work and personal life. Moreover, the highest scoring item is related to the passion conveyed by the work. Satisfaction with this aspect is very high on average, reinforcing previous results about the fact that MAD seems, for many respondents, a step towards future permanent teaching.

The table provides also the estimated marginal satisfaction means across the different motivational clusters of teachers, after accounting for the socio-demographic composition of the groups.

Table 1. Job satisfaction and job interest over clusters (sample means and means estimated by the OLS regression model for each cluster, scale 1-10)

	Mean (sd)	Adapted-in- strumental (Cluster 1)	Vocational-ex- pressive (Cluster 2)	Disoriented-in progress (Cluster 3)
How satisfied are you with the following aspects? (1 Not at all - 10 Totally)				
1. Current job	7.39 (2.14)	7.82	7.54	6.30
2. Income	6.16 (2.47)	6.88	5.57	5.78
3. Career opportunities offered by the job	5.10 (2.54)	5.76	4.81	4.32
4. Number of hours worked, or work intensity	7.12 (2.17)	7.59	6.92	6.57
5. Job stability	4.07 (2.78)	4.67	3.57	3.81
6. Commute distance and travel time from home to work	6.81 (2.84)	6.92	6.46	7.07
7. Passion conveyed by the job	8.49 (1.74)	8.96	8.69	7.36
8. Work-Family balance possibility	7.56 (2.05)	8.08	7.32	7.00
9. Work-Life balance possibility	6.85 (2.32)	7.25	6.69	6.33
How interesting do you find your job as a teacher? (1 Not at all - 10 Totally)	9.03 (1.29)	9.32	9.27	8.19

Regarding overall job satisfaction, the Adapted-instrumental and Vocational-expressive groups report similar higher scores, in contrast with the Disoriented-in progress group's score, which is substantially lower, more than one point below the overall mean. The strong aspirational motivation in the first two groups appears to play a key role in fostering higher satisfaction levels. This trend is evident in satisfaction with job stability, which displays, again, significant disparities between the groups. In this dimension, however, the Vocational-expressive group diverges from the Adapted-instrumental one, with notably lower satisfaction scores—lower even than those of the Disoriented-in progress group. Those strongly committed to teaching (Vocational-expressive) appear to be more affected by the precariousness of their employment, while the Adapted-instrumental group may view these short-term positions through MAD as valuable opportunities. In this case, Vocational-expressive teachers seem to suffer more the existing distance between their desire to fully become teachers and their transitioning role, at the moment of the interview.

Finally, also differences regarding the interest towards teaching as a profession are observed among the groups. The Disoriented-in progress group shows significantly lower interest scores than the other two clusters, suggesting that for these individuals MAD seems more frequently an exploratory behaviour in the labour market, when not even an instrumental passage while looking for another job.

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate a specific segment of the teacher labour market. After highlighting the importance of recruitment mechanisms in schools, we focused on teachers hired through a particularly flexible recruitment channel: the *Messa a Disposizione* (MAD). Even though many teachers are hired each year through MAD on fixed-term contracts, very little is known about these individuals or their career paths. Moreover, since their hiring is local, highly discretionary, and not subject to qualification restraints, there are doubts about MAD as individual opportunistically passing through the school system, taking advantage of a job but generating negative effects on the school system itself.

The sample investigates (RQ1a), showing socio-demographics in line with the broader Italian substitute teacher profile, may serve as a first preliminary description of MAD teachers, a vital but unknown population for the Italian school system. As hypothesised (HP1), we have identified a significant presence of support teachers among teachers mad

Our results show a highly heterogeneous sample composition along respondent's socio-demos. This heterogeneity also characterizes the educational and qualification paths of the respondents. Generally, we can assert that, in most cases, MAD teachers have not yet completed the training path required for the role they currently occupy. These results may corroborate findings from previous studies, suggesting that MAD teachers are often perceived, by those who experience the school on a daily basis (school staff, students, parents), as underprepared and unsuitable for their roles (Ferrero, 2023; Toscano & Verduci, 2023). This evidence could be concerning, as the dynamics of hiring inadequately trained teachers' conflict with the goal of creating a high-quality school system, especially when more sensitive aspects, such as special needs education, are involved. Certainly, these findings emphasize the importance of focusing attention on the necessity of establishing a well-structured and clearly defined system for teacher training and recruitment, in which MAD could be incorporated as a traineeship phase within the training pathway (Bertagna, 2022). On the other hand, the lack of formal teaching qualifications among MAD assumes a totally different meaning, once that we examine it considering their career trajectories and objec-

tives. Indeed, we observe that many respondents are actively studying to obtaining an advanced degree or a teaching certification. This trend is a preliminary indication of a strong inclination among these individuals toward the teaching profession, confirmed by explicit measurement of motivational factors (RQ2): our results reveal a marked tendency among respondents to view teaching as a lasting career (especially in the Adapted-instrumental and Vocational-expressive groups). On the other hand, there is a group of teachers who appear to be passing through the school system through MAD, without demonstrating a specific motivation for a teaching career (Disoriented-in progress). In essence, for most MAD teachers, teaching represents a clear and highly desired career path, compensating their actual limited access to alternative recruitment channels within the education system. For this reason, MAD may be used by teachers as a tool for “job testing”¹³: the time spent in school can provide an opportunity for career exploration, allowing them to confirm or reassess their own vocational inclinations.

Our hypothesis (HP2) appears to be confirmed, suggesting that MAD effectively functions as a recruitment channel for future teachers and is primarily used by those who aim to enter and remain in the teaching profession. Conversely, the use of MAD as a tool for obtaining a temporary job seems to be limited to a few cases.

Supporting this finding, MAD teachers report high levels of satisfaction with their work and the associated extrinsic aspects, demonstrating a fit for this profession, despite the relevant dissatisfaction about job security and career advancement potential (RQ3). We observed that job satisfaction, as well as interest in teaching, is strongly influenced by motivational aspects, confirming the findings of previous studies (Argentin, 2010). Contrary to our hypothesis (HP3), individuals who do not express certainty and motivation to enter the school system permanently are less satisfied with their occupation compared to teachers with a strong professional aspiration. The mechanism identified by Gerosa (2014), according to which those who voluntarily choose temporary employment tend to exhibit higher satisfaction does not seem to apply in this case, probably because the MAD contract itself captures substitute teachers far away from the ones traditionally recruited through the traditional temporary positions (lasting more and, in addition, requiring much more paperwork, to be obtained). However, even among highly motivated teachers, differences emerge: some (Adapted-instrumental) appear to accept their precarious employment status more readily, whereas others (Vocational-expressive) feel significantly disadvantaged and perceive job discontinuity as a barrier to their teaching careers.

¹³ We use this expression, that seems fitting better the situation than the alternative one of “job shopping” (Johnson, 1978).

More broadly, the dissatisfaction about job security and career advancement potential correlates with the brevity of their employment contracts, highlighting the precarious conditions experienced by MAD teachers. Indeed, contracts that extend only to June (at best) entail clear negative repercussions for individuals. The condition of these teachers involves significant risks in terms of economic stability and the individual possibility to create, and benefit from, stable and long-lasting professional relationships.

The duration of these contracts also presents systemic challenges: from increased public spending, as the social security system is likely called upon once contracts end, to the negative impact of high teacher turnover within classrooms. Additionally, the contractual patterns observed among the surveyed teachers indicate that the use of MAD frequently diverges from its original intent: instead of merely filling temporary vacancies for absent tenured teachers, it is now often to address broader systemic instability associated with widespread precarious employment. This use of the MAD recruitment channel may contribute to forming a group of highly disadvantaged individuals. They may find themselves in an extremely precarious position, even more so than other substitute teachers, highlighting the phenomenon of *civic stratification*.

In conclusion, we find that MAD has the potential to serve as a useful instrument for both individuals—who can gain valuable teaching experience and understand to what extent this job fits their needs—and for the education system, which benefits from a flexible labour force component to solve emergency staffing needs. However, correct usage of this tool is essential, necessitating detailed regulatory guidelines for MAD's application. In this sense, the recently introduced recruitment channel called *Interpello*¹⁴ does not seem to make any headway regarding MAD issues. Evident difficulties remain for individual teachers: they are forced to chase schools to obtain employment contracts.

At the same time, it is crucial to safeguard the individuals employed through this channel. As suggested by Bertagna (2020), MAD could be re-framed as a period of training or internship, thereby granting its formal acknowledgment. This approach would maintain the aspect of employment discontinuity but would allow these additional and exceptional recruitment channels to serve as a significant step toward a teaching career and to be reinforce, in example, through ad hoc professional development initiatives.

Policies governing MAD (and similar mechanisms) should consider their critical role in shaping the preliminary, often uncertain, entry experiences of prospective teachers within the Italian educational system.

¹⁴ Interpello is a hiring mechanism introduced in 2024 (OM n.88 – 16/05/2024). It allows schools to publish official notices seeking to fill vacant teaching positions when traditional recruitment channels are exhausted.

From the research perspective, future studies could use our analysis as a starting point to examine specific subgroups of teachers, investigating the issue of precarity in greater depth also with qualitative methodology; we hope that it will be possible to compare different groups of teachers throughout targeted surveys.

References

- Abbiati, G., Argentin, G., & Gerosa, T. (2021, settembre 13). *Il valzer degli insegnanti penalizza i più deboli*. Tratto da *lavoce.info*: <https://lavoce.info/archives/89555/il-valzer-degli-insegnanti-penalizza-i-piu-deboli/>
- Antonini, G., Argentin, G., & Santagati, M. (Under publication). L' altra faccia della segregazione scolastica: gli insegnanti nelle classi con alta concentrazione di studenti con background migratorio.
- Argentin, G. (2010). «Scegliere» di insegnare: vocazioni, vantaggi e caso. In A. Cavalli, & G. Argentin (A cura di), *Gli insegnanti italiani: come cambia il modo di fare scuola* (p. 51-74). Bologna.
- Argentin, G. (2018). *Gli insegnanti nella scuola italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Argentin, G. (2021). *Nosta scuola quotidiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Argentin, G., & Pavolini, E. (2020). How Schools Directly Contribute to the Reproduction of Social Inequalities. Evidence of Tertiary Effects, Taken from Italian Research. *Politiche sociali*, 7(1), 149-176.
- Barbieri, G., & Sestito, P. (2017). La giostra degli insegnanti: precariato e turnover nell'ultimo biennio. *Questioni di Economia e Finanza*(378).
- Bertagna, G. (2020). Formazione iniziale e reclutamento dei docenti: nuove basi per una ripartenza. *Nuova secondaria*(1), 4-7.
- Berton, F., Richiardi, M., & Sacchi, S. (2009). *Flex-insecurity, Perché in Italia la flessibilità diventa precarietà*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Carbone, D., & Gargiulo, E. (2022). Un reclutamento 'stratificato': I docenti italiani tra mobilità territoriale e di carriera. *Scuola Democratica*, 463-483.
- Cavalli, A., & Argentin, G. (A cura di). (2010). *Gli insegnanti italiani: come cambia il modo di fare scuola*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Colombo M., Argentin G. e Pandolfini V. (2016), "La sociologia dell'educazione in Italia: prospettive di ricerca di fronte alla "riformabilità" dei sistemi educativi", in F. Corbisiero, E. Ruspini (a cura di), *Sociologia del futuro. Studiare la società del ventunesimo secolo*, Cedam, Padova
- Colucci, M., & Gallo, S. (A cura di). (2017). *In cattedra con la valigia*. Roma: Donzelli.
- D'Onofrio, G., & Caputo, G. (2017). Pendolarità e precarietà lavorativa delle maestre fra la Campania e Roma. In M. Colucci, & S. Gallo, *In cattedra con la valigia. Gli insegnanti tra stabilizzazione e mobilità*. Roma: Donzelli Editore.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2021). Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development and Well-being. In *Eurydice report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Ferrero, V. (2023). Inclusione: una questione di formazione? Formazione degli insegnanti di sostegno e modalità di reclutamento come fattori non tradizionali di disuguaglianza.

- Formare insegnanti ed educatori inclusivi. I curricoli formativi per la disabilità nello scenario attuale*, 15(25), 252-272.
- FLC CGIL. (2019, ottobre 08). *Sostegno: servono investimenti urgenti per un piano pluriennale di formazione e stabilizzazione*. Tratto da www.flcgil.it.
- FLC CGIL. (2020, January 28). "Voglio insegnare" *Corsa on line per fare supplenze*. Tratto da <https://www.flcgil.it/>.
- Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli. (2009). *Rapporto sulla scuola in Italia*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Gargiulo, E. (2017). Logiche e meccanismi del reclutamento scolastico. In M. Colucci, & S. Gallo (A cura di), *In cattedra con la valigia. Gli insegnanti tra stabilizzazione e mobilità* (p. 71-86). Roma: Donzelli editore.
- Gavosto, A. (2022). *La scuola bloccata*. Bari: Laterza.
- Gerosa, T. (2014). Premiati e (s)contenti. Come la condizione contrattuale degli insegnanti italiani incide sulla loro soddisfazione. *Scuola democratica, Learning for Democracy*(3/2014), p. 525-548.
- Gremigni, E. (2013). Una precarietà istituzionalizzata: Diventare insegnanti nella scuola pubblica italiana. *Scuola Democratica*(1), 105-124 .
- ISTAT. (2024, November). *Rilevazione sulle forze di lavoro - Documenti di processo*. Tratto da SIQual: www.siquil.istat.it
- Johnson, W. R. (1978, May). A Theory of Job Shopping. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, p. 261-277.
- Lockwood, D. (1996, Settembre). Civic Integration and Class Formation. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 47(3), 531-550.
- Magni, F. (2019). *Formazione iniziale e reclutamento degli insegnanti in Italia*. Roma: Studium.
- Ministero dell'economia e delle finanze. (2013). *Analisi di alcuni dati del conto annuale del periodo 2007-2011*.
- Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito (MIM). (2024, November). Tratto da Portale Unico dei Dati della Scuola: <https://dati.istruzione.it/opendata/>
- Morris, L. (2003). Managing Contradiction: Civic Stratification and Migrants' Rights. *The International Migration Review*, 37(1), 74-100.
- OECD. (2005). *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*. Parigi: OECD Publications .
- Ribolzi, L. (2014). *Il sistema ingessato. Autonomia, scelta e qualità nella scuola italiana*. La Scuola SEI.
- Ribolzi, L. (2003). Il compito degli insegnanti nella scuola della riforma. *La formazione degli insegnanti nella scuola della riforma* (pp. 68-75). Le Monnier.
- Santiago, P. (2004). The Labour Market for Teachers. *International Handbook on the Economics of Education*, 522-578.
- Toscano, E., & Verduci, A. (2023). Pandemia e politiche scolastiche. Il caso italiano dei 'docenti COVID'. *Scuola democratica, Learning for Democracy*(1), 211-228.