

GUIDING AT UNIVERSITY. THE PROTAGONISTS' POINT OF VIEW

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ABSTRACT: Starting from both an Italian phenomenological perspective and some international works that develop the guidance theme in the direction of 'educational guidance', this chapter will briefly present the aims, instruments, and results of the Parthenope University Research Unit of the PRIN EMP&Co study, which focused on the specific segment of university guidance. The reflection generated by the study provides information and data to identify guidance methods through a pedagogical approach.

KEYWORDS: pedagogy, educational guidance, higher education, life-project.

1. Introduction

The contemporary era is characterized by a substantial diversification of professions. The rapid changes in workplaces and the uncertain nature of employment situations are forcing individuals to constantly come to terms with continuous changes in their lives, which implies the need to learn to constantly rebuild a sense of Self. Flexibility and mobility in the professional field therefore require education and training that provide people with support that goes beyond the mere transfer of contents and knowledge. They need to equip individuals with the ability to cope with the experience of change. All those activities aimed at allowing individuals to recognize and develop their own aptitudes, skills, and competencies therefore become central in the educational experience, in order to consciously build and manage their life project; all such activities correspond to the term *educational guidance*.

2. Theoretical premises, subjects, and methodology

Educational guidance appropriate to the current socio-cultural background should therefore be defined as a continuous process that accompanies all the phases of existence, aiming to put the individual in a condition to make conscious choices in order to exert control over their own life and to be positive and effective at personal, social and professional levels. However, the current state of education-

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al guidance has not yet seen the existence of a guidance system that concretely places itself as an educational and training support system developed within people's overall lifespan of. Most of the guidance activities currently being developed in the field of formal education refer to some training paths for individuals, identified as particularly critical, such as moments linked to the choice of their educational and professional pathway. In particular, the selection and entrance phase of the University represents one of the moments that sees the widest production of activities, aimed at supporting individuals in coping with this delicate phase.

Therefore, while emphasizing the need for a guidance system to define the horizon of its action to take in people's whole existence, education, and choices, the research presented in these pages concentrated on University guidance practices in Italy, understood at present as the most critical and sensitive crossroads of the training path. Most of all, the research concerned the approaches and guidance practices of University entrance in Italy.

The observed perspective chosen is of a pedagogical matrix; i.e., it interprets guidance as a process of an intrinsically educational nature, identifying education in general as a fundamental process which itself expresses guidance characteristics. In other words, the idea is assumed that an education which fully responds to its prerogatives must necessarily fulfil the fundamental goal of making individuals in training capable of coping in the context of complex living experiences and to guide themselves in their ability to choose and train.

Discussing guidance should therefore, in our opinion, be based on the key theme of human formation (Cambi 2003; Massa, Demetrio 1991) both in terms of institutional formative pathways and the mechanisms linked to them, and in the field of scientific research. This horizon acquires the existential concreteness of educational phenomena (Massa and Demetrio 1991) as a guiding principle for designing effective guidance and, therefore, for an 'up-to-date education'. In this sense, in recent years, the role and specificity of pedagogy have adopted a much clearer stance (Cunti 2008, 2015; Domenici 2003; Loiodice 2009; Lo Presti 2010, 2015; Pombeni 1996), through the design of methods and training instruments intended to integrate critical capabilities on their own, and on cognitive and identity processes that guide choices in relation to the opportunities in educational contexts (Bateson 1972; Bertolini 1988; Bruner 1990; Dewey 1946; Gardner 1991; Massa, Demetrio 1991).

In this direction, the overall aim of the research was to investigate both the most widespread practices in the Italian University system and the related models, with the specific intention of verifying the presence of *educational dimensions*, i.e., theories and methods focusing

on the goal of the overall maturation of an individual in projecting capability of choice.

From a methodological point of view, the research favoured a phenomenological-hermeneutical perspective (Bertolini 1988; Bertin, Contini 1983; Cavana, Casadei 2016; Husserl 1954; Merleau-Ponty 1945). The assumption of this theoretical horizon therefore, led the interest not towards mere facts, but in the direction of the impact they have on individuals through the meaning they assume in their lives: «phenomenology is seeking realities, not pursuing truth» (Mortari, Tarozzi 2010: 18). In this way, in the background, the research acquired the assumption that deeper understanding needs to pass via an individual's own standpoints. Similarly, the research strategy was of a qualitative nature (Clandinin, Connelly 2000).

Starting from these assumptions, the research developed in two phases. The first featured representatives of governance and guidance operators (rectors' delegates, coordinators and/or branch office operators); instead, the second involved groups of students attending their first year of University.

The specific purpose of the first phase was to identify the guidance models and practices in use at the Italian Universities involved, taking a closer look at their educational and training dimensions. The second, on the other hand, sought to identify students' guidance needs and the deepest individual aspects at the basis of their choices and life planning and, secondly, to try the same line of inquiry with students as a possible self-reflective guidance value strategy in the field of incoming University guidance.

3. *The first research phase: aims, instruments, results*

This phase involved, as anticipated, privileged interlocutors of the academic world and institutional representatives engaged in guidance actions. Specifically, 10 subjects (pro-rector, guidance delegate, operators, teachers) were involved, placed in key positions in the programming and managing of the above-mentioned proceedings at the Universities of Padua, Florence, Siena, Naples "Parthenope" and Naples "Federico II". The instrument chosen to collect research data, in qualitative terms, was the *semi-structured interview* designed and built to obtain profound, critical, and objective knowledge of the research subject from subjective points of view.

The interview was organized on the basis of specific thematic areas related to a description of the services offered, the *mission* and the approach pursued, the *organization and management of activities*, the *methodology and instruments used*, the *professional skills and competencies*

involved, the evaluation of practices, the system actions implemented, and the interplay between guidance and University teaching. The interviews were carried out with guaranteed anonymity at the various universities and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently screened and transcribed in full.

The aim of this phase was, therefore, to return to the *knowledge, representation, and beliefs*, including *implicit* ones, which are at the basis of guidance actions in order to obtain a *background model*. In other words, from an individual point of view, it set out to identify and examine implicit and explicit patterns at the origin of the university guidance system, in a search for the meaning, logic, and educational dimensions that lie behind the practices, to define an image of the approaches through which it is organized and implemented in the institutional contexts in question.

Certainly, the results outlined do not constitute extensible or generalizable data, since it is not a quantitative statistical survey; more exactly, according to the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, they represent a key to reading the object which, through attention to the singularity of the cases, provides levels of knowledge and depth that contribute to clarifying its nature.

The interviews were analysed categorically with Atlas-ti 6.0 software (Muhr 2000), based on a network structure consisting of a corpus of hermeneutical units and an intuitive and creative approach to data usage.

The generative research question that motivated the categorical analysis was created based on the famous formula of Glaser (1998) “What’s going on here?” and was expressed in “How does guidance happen in Italian university contexts; which approach do the practices imply?”

3.1 Data analysis

The analysis of the interviews was divided into three phases: *initial or open encoding*, which consisted of line-by-line text analyses, according to the presupposition that ‘All is data’ to identify the minimal meaning units (text pieces) and the thematic recurrences in the form of precisely defined ‘labelled phenomena’; *focused encoding*, which allowed identification of conceptually wider macro-categories through a redefinition of the initial labels and their transformation into more mature concepts; *theoretical encoding*, which allowed development of a conceptual model that supplemented the main categories.

In the initial coding phase, 85 codes were identified (Code map) and these referred to all the sensitizing concepts that emerged from the first analysis of the corpus of interviews, regarding the initial search

inquiry. Subsequently, the codes considered redundant were grouped into a smaller number (32), then further reduced to 21. In the focalized encoding phase, the codes became 4 broader macro-categories, which through conceptual work were appropriately renamed and associated through semantic links. From these reports, in the last phase (theoretical encoding), the central category was identified, inductively identified by following the hierarchical work on the categories emerging from the data, from which a general theory on the University Guidance Process was integrated and delineated. This theory expresses all the points of view, facts, beliefs, and implicit knowledge of those interviewed, sorted into a unique configuration that generalizes the contents on the basis of categorical comparisons and combinations.

From this general theory comes a guidance approach denominated *matching*, in which choice is represented as the best result of the relationship between the individual and the university's educational offering. In this sense, the guidance is interpreted by the individuals involved as an instrument that links what the student likes doing to the corresponding Degree Course. This guidance approach would thus seem to refer to theories on personal-environment adaptation, which are defined as *matching theories* (Parsons 1909), and which describe choice as the most 'economic' result in the relationship between individual characteristics and environmental ones.

In addition, a generalized approach to guidance is mainly interpreted as a *marketing strategy* aimed at suggesting and attracting large, anonymous crowds of students in which every individuality is destroyed (Demarie, Molina 2007). The emerging theory is indicated as being of a predominantly informative nature, and is appreciated for its usefulness in the immediate future; in other words, it is assumed that information may possess the enlightening power to provide students with an instrument to recognize themselves in their own future. It emerges that the individual and the institutional dimension blend in favour of the needs of the latter to the detriment of recognition of the former, where, on the contrary, an individual's needs to project, construct, and give meaning to their existence, should in our opinion, become the primary aim of university guidance.

In short, even if, according to recent theoretical models, guidance interventions should provide a response to individuals' need to reflect on themselves and know themselves to construct a life project that fully represents their subjectivity, it is clear how such models do not actually find a precise correspondence between theoretical/declarative aspects and practical/applicative developments in the actual perpetuation of an informative-divulging approach.

From the general theoretical project that emerged, four macro-categories of synthesis were obtained, connected by semantic links,

which explain the University Guidance Practices in the view of the interviewers and offer the opportunity to reflect critically on them.

The four macro-categories that emerged are as follows.

POLITICAL MODEL

This category essentially represents a series of points of view and acquisitions that follow a hierarchical mode in determining the planning of guidance strategies; a mode in which the rules, visions, and educational values that the guidance determines seem more compatible with the requirements of the University system, rather than being tailor-made to the individual student. The process outlined by the categorical analysis of the corpus highlights how guidance is understood as coherently based on a vision of a linear pathway in which choice is interpreted as already clearly present in an individual, being directly linked to a specific training course and hence a presumed aim of the working world that corresponds to it.

LITERATURE MODEL

This category expresses points of view that generally place individuals and their characteristics at the centre of guidance processes; in fact, it would outline an alternative to the political model in conceiving the paths that lead individuals to build their own identity, educational paths, and career. However, for reasons likely to be traced both to logistical and infrastructural crises, and in a common difficulty in clearly identifying a widely recognized and shared theoretical-methodological background, this kind of model fails to be coherently and concretely placed to guide planning. An awareness regarding the importance of referring to a scientific-theoretical model of guidance emerges, supporting and helping the political model, which, however, remains unchained to the practices, staying confined to the background of a merely declarative dimension of the principle lines.

STUDENTS AS PAINTERS OF THEMSELVES

This category expresses awareness of the complex dynamics that interact in individual decision processes, in which the significant individual narrative is supremely relevant. As a result, the subjects interviewed showed that they recognized the complex aims of effective guidance, clearly identifying the subjective and variable nature of the dynamics that make up the student learning experience; however, even in this case, such awareness did not match the relevant practices.

GUIDANCE-TEACHING DICHOTOMY

The fourth category groups the opinions that describe the lack of recognition of a meaningful relationship between guidance and teach-

ing as if the latter did not already incorporate a guiding prerogative. In other words, the planning of guidance and the management of 'ordinary' didactics appear to be out of step: teaching does not usually cover guidance and does not benefit from the actions carried out by guidance services, except where it is believed to benefit from the presence of previously well-trained students. Teaching and guidance are therefore represented as two fields disengaged from one another, although the teaching experience never plays a neutral role in subject guidance processes, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

The theoretical system derived from qualitative analyses of data therefore leads to the conclusion that, for the subjects involved, the prevailing concept of University guidance, even if tendentially structured according to an approach and a mission based on more or less clear theoretical guidelines, still has some gaps. We would like to emphasize the disagreement with the strong need of individuals to be accompanied in the task of giving meaning to their existential projects and projecting themselves towards the future (Benasayag, Schmit 2004).

To conclude, analysis of the set of results linked to this phase very quickly highlighted, the following critical points:

- Substantial dissolution between emerging models and the quality of practices actually developed
- Failure to refer to a shared system of projecting and guidance management (absence of a recognized and unambiguous legacy)
- Unmodified direction of guidance on the educational side
- Failure to recognize individualization and centring elements on the subject.

4. *The second research phase: aims, instruments, results*

The second phase, as anticipated, directly involved the students, aiming to identify their guidance needs, the deepest individual aspects at the basis of their choices and life planning, and possible guidance strategies to respond to these. In this case, the instrument chosen and considered the most suitable to achieve the objectives was the *focus group* (Merton, Kendal 1946), which, with its interactive mode, represented a useful instrument both to recover deep-seated information about the points of view of the students involved, and to activate a reflective interactive posture that could guide the subjects themselves to become aware of their active and constructive role in the processes of choice. This second aim, in particular, was intended to correspond to the intention, which we have already referred to, to experience a short 'educational path' of a reflective nature, dur-

ing which participants could talk and swap opinions on the theme of guidance by drawing on the elements of reflection useful to activate internal self-revaluation processes, concerning their own knowledge and competencies.

The use of the focus group was therefore linked to the choice of using narrative to generate dynamic reflection on complex themes that affect the individual's guidance within a context of group interaction, the latter being seen as a resource useful to collect information, points of view, personal problems, stances, but also to collectively produce alternative ideas and viable solutions (Duggleby 2005; Krueger, Casey 2000).

The planning that preceded the focus groups was split into a phase of conceptualization and development of the themes and of the related questions and techniques; a phase of choice and recruitment of the potential participants, and finally, a stage of logistics and project-organization regarding the manner of conducting the discussion and the moderators to be involved.

The participating students were recruited from membership lists through the guidance information desk by a personal request for participation by email. Starting from the consensus obtained, heterogeneous groups were created by age and scope of training in order to promote greater variety and exchange point of views and to promote a certain dynamism in the discussion.

As regards the implementation phases, groups were created of 12 members and a moderator team, consisting of a moderator, responsible for presenting questions, stimulating materials and facilitating discussion, promoting and encouraging the students to participate; and an assistant moderator, as suggested by Krueger (1994), with the task of video-recording the sessions and writing any memos. The chosen mode of conduct was mixed, and, broadly speaking, it had the moderator playing a marginal role during group discussions and an active role in launching themes and supporting discussions with encouragement and meaning feedback. The setting for the discussions – warm, friendly, permissive, and non-threatening (Krueger 1994) was a neutral space at the University's facilities that the students regularly use, and was therefore familiar to them and non-inhibitory.

Considering the complexity and multidimensionality of the object of the focus group, it was decided to create 3 sessions per group one week apart, to give the necessary time to reflect on the personal aspects that emerged during the discussion and to produce narrative material useful for the next session. The structure of the focus group sessions started from the way in which Savickas and Hartung (2012) organized career history production according to the famous formula *Telling-Hearing-Enacting My Story*, which, in the case of the present

research, was arranged and adapted to the *educational story* which becomes a *life project*. In the work described, the focus group was used as a qualitative instrument of the narrative revelation, but also as a training moment for the students involved and a chance for the research group to build a pedagogical university guidance proposal that dealt with educational issues.

4.1 Data analysis

The qualitative data collected through the 3 focus group sessions was subjected to categorical and content analysis with the support of Atlas.ti software. The analysis of the corpus was divided into three phases: initial or open coding, which identified the meaningful text parts containing the sensitizing concepts (60 codes); focused encoding, which redefined the labelling work as well as 20 conceptualized macro-categories; theoretical coding, which identified and elaborated the most mature concepts in the form of a conceptual model (9 codes). The analysis therefore allowed the formulation of a theory that explained the process leading the participants to fathom and/or change their meaning in life.

The core of the conceptual system has been defined as *Fragility of Choices* and it represents the widest and most branched category emerging from textual analysis. The theme of choices is redundant in the participants' narratives and is described as an element characterizing their life paths in a pervasive way, since, although it represents a growing and formative opportunity for the person, it does seem to have been lived in negative terms, as a *weight on the shoulders* and a time of difficulty to cope with. In fact, the description of the choices that emerged from the analysis refers to dimensions such as those of obligation, conditioning by others, renunciation, and, above all, an absence of those fundamental aspects – knowledge, passions, interests – starting from which decisions are made that consider both rational and emotional-affective aspects. In other words, the *core category* highlights that the choices acquire deep meanings which transcend a mere selection from among different alternatives, in order to decisively affect the future. Not only does this create the fear of failing to make sufficiently weighty and profitable choices, it does not tolerate the possibility of making mistakes either.

Around the central core just described revolve another 8 macro-categories, held together by semantic links, which explain how the participants come to build their meaning in life:

- Recursive transitions
- Ambivalence about institutional education;
- Personal experience;

- Significant adults;
- Guidance disconnected from needs;
- Self-guidance;
- Vocation comes at work;
- Sense of existence between work and knowledge.

The imminence and obligation of choices intensifies due to, and at the same time as, *recursive transitions* which mark the participants' life paths. The transitions referred to, are, for example, the canonical ones that affect the community of teenagers and young adults in the transition between different orders and degrees of formal education. In fact, although change and transitions represent a structural datum of people's whole life-cycle, those described in the narratives seem to have a potential for criticality precisely because of the need to make some choices that clearly also include a degree of resolution with oneself and the surrounding environment. Thus, what appeared to have, at least in the previous decades, an evolutionary potential in terms of emancipatory change (transition as an exclusively positive event) is characterized today by its involutorial character, to procrastinate and/or stagnate. What emerges, therefore, is worry, and the need to identify educational and professional paths that are satisfactory and congruent with one's personal expectations and aspirations.

Moreover, the ambivalence of institutional education emerges, which, despite undertaking for individuals one of the privileged contexts for assuming a 'form', in the sense of acquiring a specific way of being and living, seem to be ineffective in supporting and educating *choices*. In this regard, it emerges, above all, that high schools are described as a pathway which, instead of welcoming and 'keeping', 'alienate' the subject as a place where teenagers cannot perceive the possibility of recognizing themselves.

Instead, the side of *personal experience* is interpreted as the most significant in relation to identity-building and self-knowledge; elements that prelude the choice and, therefore, help clarify the existential projects.

The process leading to Self-determination is clearly seen by others, in particular by significant adults, parents, and teachers, who, in a few cases, were described as fully able to offer the instruments to make the self-construction of choice paths concrete, for example, by offering themselves as an example or a guide, since they are more often considered as figures predominantly engaged in providing prescriptive indications and advice that channel their idea of others into pre-established paths.

What emerges from the quality of the teachers' educational work reflects in a substantial way the meaning that guidance assumes in institutional contexts. According to the participants, guidance is un-

dervalued, tackled superficially, not supported by specially trained educational figures, following an informed approach, considered virtually ineffective in responding to their needs. However, the participants did identify an alternative guidance instrument that they categorize with their work experience. In fact, this represents one of the most pregnant occasions in understanding what they intend to be, since it offers an opportunity to practically experience professional roles through the introduction of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes that only in this way they discover they have. It follows that *vocation comes at work* through discovery of self-related aspects of the professional sphere that were previously latent.

Consequently, guidance is described by the participants not as a habitus born and cultivated in formal educational contexts, but as a form of self-guidance that takes the traits of an adaptive response to the lack of educational actions in this direction. In other words, the participants looked independently outside institutional contexts for the instruments they needed to make choices that were not hasty and superficial.

All this interrelated system of contexts, processes, reference figures, and divisions that affect the personal and professional sphere contribute to determining what represents their meaning in life. What guides and motivates the sense of existence is also in this case embodied in elements such as personal fulfilment and satisfaction concerning work and, in a more general perspective, the need to know and discover oneself and the surrounding world to find constructive forms of self-expression.

There seems to be a certain degree of autonomy in the exercising of choices and, therefore, in the ability to guide oneself, but this is generated mostly by cases of absolute necessity, which turn to a natural guidance predisposition, rather than a sense of responsibility and self-awareness. In other words, self-directed choices and paths are accompanied by a continual latent sense of restlessness, as a result of a 'leap into the dark' rather than the result of a project that combines self-knowledge and opportunities. This seems to indicate a tendential ineffectiveness on the side of educational responsibilities, which do not emerge as significant in the perception and interpretation of the subjects in relation to their guidance needs. In this direction, what appears relevant is the reference to work and the category of direct experience as the main sources of guidance; sources linked, however, to chance, and above all not filtered by a systematic critical exercise of the subjective value it could have. In other words, in the individual interpretations, 'personal experience teaches' more than educational institutions, although this does not directly imply that experience itself is the subject of critical analysis.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the path ultimately highlighted some elements of knowledge that are useful in defining the pathways of educational guidance to be tested, validated, and improved on successive occasions within further contexts comparable to more typical characteristics. These elements are:

- the effectiveness of educational work carried out within group discussions as a privileged place for the expression of a narrative-dialogic perspective;
- the use of narrative as a reflective and viatical instrument fundamental for the development of knowledge, awareness, training, and self-education;
- acknowledgment of an educational benefit perceived by students in terms of self-awareness, of reflective and guidance competencies that would also indicate the need to plan guidance routes according to systematic, structured, accompanying forms, which are repeated at good stages marking the academic year;
- the fact that, despite focus groups having been conducted in different contexts, universities, and territories (which also led to diversity in the field of objective opportunities), there was a strong overlap in the aspects that characterize student experiences with respect to themes of choice and the future in general, as well as of the generally expressed guidance needs.

The theme of the *competency of choice*, as the central guidance category, appeared transversely, in the light of the outcomes, deeply bound up with constant exercise in self-questioning and reality. The option to direct guidance practices to the concreteness and density of the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of *making meaning*, rather than merely providing information and knowledge, or measuring abilities and aptitudes, appears effective with respect to the aim of highlighting the link with personal experience as a subjective experience of reworking meaning that acts as a *theory guiding action*. The dialogic-relational dimension, too, proved to be a structured and effective reflective space (governed by models, methods, and instruments) for constructing meaning and, therefore, ‘directions’.

Consequently, all of this reinforces the idea of an adequate pedagogical approach to guidance, and points towards further commitment to concrete experimentation with consistent practices and educational-reflective instruments that make them operational within heterogeneous and pluralistic contexts in a sharing and systemic view.

Our work has been moving along this road and the information that has emerged seems to confirm the need for a further and con-

tinuous evolution of the skills expressed by the educational system towards the ability to meet, interpret, and support the singularity and complexity of the most current needs of subjects in training.

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