

GUIDANCE SPECIFICITY IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH. CRITICISMS AND AREA OF INTERVENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to discuss and reflect on the Neapolitan section of the PRIN project from a critical perspective. The research underlines the relevance of combining the dimensions of meaning, continuity, and change, giving individuals the chance to try out promising educational itineraries where guidance is understood as a pedagogical tool of higher education contexts.

KEYWORDS: higher education, personal and professional identity, self-realization, guidance, counseling.

1. Introduction

Guidance is undoubtedly a complex theme, primarily because it represents the development of educational processes. Indeed, it is from its close relationship with education that the necessity arises to link it to, amongst others, the processes to develop the Self, the various forms of conditioning and educational care, and the quality of interpersonal and social relationships. It represents a critical perspective coherent with the fields explored by the PRIN project, also considering the trajectory it followed before becoming a part of educational research. Traditionally, guidance has been a field of psychological and sociological research: the former, throughout its complex evolution, focusing predominantly on the possibility of harmonizing students' motivations (not only cognitive, of course) with those of the workplace. These studies, while at various times giving precedence to one or the other, have aimed at producing a match that would satisfy both, and therefore benefit people's wellbeing as well as the system development. The latter adopts a mainly analytical point of view of the processes of change within social systems in respect to individual working existence. Both approaches describe and link objects and/or phenomena, however, such a perspective falls short when the challenge facing guidance becomes that of creating, both educationally and structurally, contexts, relationships, and organizations capable of stimulating and growing needs, desires and strategies, as well as

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guidance skills, to evolve developmental paths of thinking, feeling and acting; in other words, to develop the Self.

2. *Guidance as an educational emergency in Higher Education*

It is increasingly widely acknowledged that guidance has become not only that of creating upon what we have, or of developing our potential, but also of making sense out of all of this by means of reflection on individuals' development within their own contexts. If this is to be one of the main pedagogical goals in guidance processes, the educational task in this area – and therefore also the social and political tasks, can be none other than to design, verify, and enhance theoretical and practical structures to define, detail and clarify the role of pedagogy. It was from this perspective that the Neapolitan research unit worked, focusing on guidance as a fundamental educational tool, and at the same time a complex subject bordering many others, and requiring both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches.

Although guidance is a lifelong issue, particularly due to the weakening of social and community support in transitional life-events, and because of the precarity of self-determination during adulthood, it is especially important for young adults, and therefore also the main educational systems that take care of them: school and university.

Postmodern characteristics (Bauman 2005, 2000; Lasch 1984) create a widespread crisis which is felt profoundly by young adults in higher education, since society requires them to overcome several developmental tasks crucial to their social recognition as adults. If the choices have multiplied vertiginously, the youth crisis is nevertheless connected as much to the unavoidability of making choices regarding their own future, as to the unpredictability of the consequences that each choice might lead to (Cunti 2008; Cunti and Priore 2014; Cunti, Priore, Bellantonio 2015).

Postmodernist society, deeply marked by risk (Beck 1986), uncertainty, and precarity (Bauman 2005), inspires a view of the future as a threat (Benasayag, Schmit 2004) rather than an opportunity or perhaps a promise (Cunti *et al.* 2015). This inability to trust in the future prompts many young adults to remain firmly in the present, so that a consequence of disenchantment (Cambi 2006) is the very underwhelming realization of an imagined future that should allow young adults to think of themselves in a guise different from the present, nurturing desires and expectations for the future. All the above calls for an educational undertaking to deal with the unexpected (Morin 2001: 14).

Young adulthood today is a particularly problematic moment of anyone's lifespan, investigated in depth by many research and disciplinary perspectives. The transition to a new condition can be identified when, at the end of high school, young adults are not only asked to simply wonder about their formal education and professional future, and ideas of the latter begin to steady in their minds and within what we might call a 'speaking community', as more than just a concept that will soon concern them; a multitude of opportunities, points of view, information, and individual and social criticisms, but, above all, the necessity to make choices that will directly impact their future, decisions for which they are responsible.

One of the educational roles that universities perform is student job placement, not only in terms of supporting the learning of knowledge/competencies coherent with specific cultural and professional profiles, but also of contributing to the development of one's personal, educational, and professional Self. The learning process is focused on a 'learning-as-adults', i.e., their own knowledge and knowhow are prioritized to allow them to structure their identity, while the major difference between university and school puts young adults in an adult relationship with knowledge, their education, the sense of this for their lives, for the realization of their Self as individuals, men/women, and citizens.

The educational quality of these systems must therefore be directed primarily at education itself, teaching students to take care of their own education, to create and sustain an aptitude to learn during their lifetime (Alberici 2002), and to identify, define and enhance their own individual, dynamic and emancipatory desires. This form of support must therefore regard methodological and innate guidance (Cunti, Priore 2014). Supporting such educational processes requires the dismissal of a concept of learning that corresponds to something well defined, therefore with the ability to adapt to those dimensions recognized as a personal and social success (OECD 2017).

Desired learning, rather than being intended as what someone wants to become, consistent with own experiences and the ability to elaborate these in the pursuit of transient, emancipatory, and transformational goals, is often flattened by being already decided, where formal education urges individuals to do everything on their own. The almost excluded value of learning is inherent to the 'freedom-from', at best anticipating often systematic and improvised attempts to pursue the 'freedom-to' (Berlin 1969), in this case welcomed as an educational task to remove obstacles that might surpass the conquest of the identified goals; accordingly, schools and universities cannot avoid educating to desire, to realize oneself as a person and a worker.

In light of the above, guidance opens up to multi-faceted interventions primarily regarding the institutional processes of designing,

structuring and putting into practice systems whose heart is the development of students' competencies, and the identification and realization of their desire and/or need for educational emancipation. In this sense, this part of the research, through contact with both university representatives and students to collect real and perceived data, encouraged reflections on the theme and offered an important study from which arise criticisms, and potential and significant areas for improvement which universities can work on in synergy.

It is well known that educational systems, universities included, are attributing an increasingly key role to guidance; in recent decades, ever since it became a strategic theme for the organizational and educational development of these institutions, the need for research to improve the productivity of systems, as well as students' emancipative wellbeing, has become more important. Consequently, pedagogical research on guidance is called to offer its contribution, to contribute and enhance knowledge, interventions, and improvements; from this point of view, the ability of institutions to make decisions based on the need for evolution represents the most important indicator of quality in guidance. The possibility of contributing to the growth of the system by one of its most important components, i.e., students, is not discounted, but must be accompanied by educational processes that press students to reflect on their own living environments and personal evolution; the PRIN research in question has assumed this fundamental value through the action of focus groups to learn from oneself in comparison with others, intercepting views and multiple experiences, as well as differentiated growth prospects, fundamental to activating closed forms of mind without which it is much more difficult to imagine, and imagine oneself, in unknown ways.

Referring to the perspective adopted by this research, and its methodological and procedural choices, there are two things to consider: firstly, the fact that guidance has somehow induced educational research to embrace and share with psychological and sociological disciplines, rigorous methodologies based on a methodological pluralism with both quantitative and qualitative aspects. It has also pushed such research to adopt an empirical base and confer a transformative dimension on the scientific field, with the intention of creating a useful, collaborative strategy for the development of society. Secondly, the challenge of maintaining the link between individuals and their contexts, without which guidance cannot be properly examined and transformed; this complexity calls for targeted actions that consistently refer to the web of elements which in turn depend on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary aspects. Nowadays, the link between individual and environment arguably necessitates the educational construction and implementation of new adaptation processes which

incorporate this relationship. The challenge is to connect them creatively, in order to explore living and working environments, identifying elements corresponding to the characteristics of individuals, and basing these processes on self-reflection with a view to discovering one's authentic desires. From this comes a need to bring individuals to the forefront, giving them the choices of responsibility and honour for systems and their own personality, given that education today cannot be separated from the concept of each individual as an integral part of their living and learning environments. Hence, the issue of an 'ecological individual' (Bateson 1972) represents both a priority and a gamble for guidance. We might ask ourselves, then, considering the principle aspects covered by the PRIN research, how the aforementioned aspects were explored while adopting the key to reading educational guidance.

One key dimension regards the relationship between *general* and *local*, which gives rise to a question of order and structure that is inherent to the research. As we have already underlined, guidance represents a priority for educational systems, the aim being to advance and streamline social and economic systems, both for the satisfaction of individuals and the development of communities. From such a perspective, the correspondence between European guidelines (ELGPN 2017) and their implementation in each country is irrefutably critical. At a structural level, the particular conditions to be created are not envisaged, thus there is always the risk of stopping at the stage of good intentions, without eliciting processes based on best practices capable of creating, testing, and implementing the identified options. The PRIN project shows that guidance is often an add-on, rather than an integral part of education and other systems, where its integration would require changing the organizational culture, especially regarding the promotion and optimization of generative and leading systematic interactions. With regard to educational research, which is essential to improving practices, it seems that the key to developing rigorous methods is transferability rather than generalization; using the former we can appreciate the diversity of contexts and document research processes and results in order to increase our knowledge and our ability to develop guidance methods. With reference to university guidance in particular, the circularity between knowledge and the practices of various contributors could include students as consultants in the process of action-research and its implementation, in which a qualitative and quantitative exploratory dimension is combined with an aspect of planning to improve institutional guidance. The intention is not to enforce a rigid barrier between the people benefitting from a system or action programme and those dedicated to obtaining satisfactory results, but instead to allow everyone involved to become

a researcher in their own right, and to act for both their own good and that of the system they are participating in. Indeed, rather than changing behaviour according to external advice, it is more productive to focus on self-reflection, both individually and in groups within institutions, to explore methods of triggering a virtuous circularity involving all relevant parties and the quality of their interactions.

A further aspect is the transverse nature of the methods in an attempt to cope with the complexity of guidance itself, as well as that of university systems. In this regard, one of the most important aspects of guidance relates to didactics, given that the subject of university guidance is so tightly interwoven with that of didactic processes (Fabri, Melacarne 2015; Fedeli, Grion, Frison 2016). The realization of a varied and interconnected approach to guidance necessitates using didactics as a guidance oriented to one's whole education. Knowledge processes must be supported and enhanced since the ways in which they are determined can lead to the building of a subjectivity capable of knowing and improving for the rest of people's lives; this requires the examination, primarily, of the methodological processes necessary for the construction of knowledge (Domenici 2009). Transversality also refers to the necessity for a kind of education that keeps levels of thinking, feeling, and acting together. In this sense, best guidance practices regard the implementation of a laboratorial methodological instrument to guide students through self-reflection on their own guidance as individuals and workers, a process that can be implemented, enacted, and improved.

3. Guidance aspects in Higher Education

As mentioned previously, educational settings are called to the fore of the struggle against this general sense of crisis, in particular, higher education contexts. For this reason, guidance has become a central theme in educational policies both in Italy and internationally (ISTAT 2016). The crisis revolves around the vision of future, in other words, the ability to imagine ourselves in the prefigurative dimension created by human beings, or to project ourselves into a guise different from the present. The difficulty in visualizing a future in which we could realize our desires prompts us to amplify and emphasize the present, a phenomenon which, alongside the consequential procrastination rather than action, particularly characterizes the young world (Benasayag, Schmit 2004). Hence it would appear to be an educational role to promote the development of capabilities (Sen 1999), i.e., the collection of resources available to a person and their ability to enact most of them. Only then can they concretely act and

become aware of their own capabilities and the way in which they can emphasize and grow them, as well as using them in conjunction with other resources, settings and people, and seeing change as evolution: this is decidedly one of the greatest and most important educational challenges.

The need highlighted is that of accompanying students' educational courses, which does not mean simply transmitting contents, but rather, concentrating on how these contents aid students in developing their own individual identity.

University contexts should, therefore, provide systematic accompaniment and support for students during their career, not only in cases requiring specific and specialized intervention. A second aspect is to enact a guidance-based didactic method, since what is being imparted is not merely the quality of the content but the way in which it becomes learning. The ultimate challenge for university contexts is to spread the culture of the 'helping requirement' in tricky situations, meaning that the possibility of counseling should be considered by students as an opportunity to be accompanied throughout their career in order to cope with critical situations. Entering, albeit in a synthetic way, the merits of the divisions identified, they should accompany and support a full expression of the abilities of choice, for an empowerment aimed at the enhancement of personal and environmental resources.

The accompaniment of knowledge processes is geared to a guidance that enables individuals to build an 'Educational Ego' (Cunti 2008: 23), in other words a Self-building process as an individual capable of learning and enhancing for a lifetime. This first subdivision opens up to education and didactics, to the guidance aspects of knowledge, provided that the methodological level in the process of accompanying knowledge-building is emphasized, also in the sense of acting in relationships in all those contexts where education is carried out in collective environments, in contrast to transmissive models.

The intrinsic guidance value of formal-learning knowledge requires an appropriate methodological itinerary so that it can express itself. In other words, scientific disciplines have a guidance value in themselves, recognizing this presupposes certain educational and didactic qualities. Learning and teaching processes are primarily processes of guidance to knowledge and culture; in this sense, guidance can be act as a strategy for educating thinking also to build oneself and the future. Thus, learning to be part of the process of creating knowledge can make one become an artisan of one's own; knowing how to grasp the dynamics at the basis of the construction of scientific knowledge cannot mean being vigilant about those that stimulate one's cultural education; knowing how to draw from time to

time on the knowledge that is useful may mean learning not to depend on what someone knows, wanting to express oneself as an individual even in the presence of culture and towards education. In general, difficulties in educational contexts are challenging to interpose between teaching and guidance, as if didactic activity did not incorporate an orientative prerogative and the didactic experience was anything but neutral in the individual guidance process, regardless of whether this happens intentionally.

As far as the definition and relationship between work and education is concerned with individual existences, this second subdivision refers to quite specific approaches, to a kind of informative, predictive, and diagnostic work/education guidance (see skills assessment) or verging more on the promotion of resources. The innovative perspective could be of Self-realization, where the work dimension has a very important definition value, oriented to enhance the theme of desire and what is important to oneself. Moreover, recent international documents have shown that often what is good for the individual is already defined and corresponds to the quality of competencies and achievements by which an individual can best be sustained. In this sense, also some of our research data (Cunti, Priore, Bellantonio 2015) underline a perspective of adaptation to the environment by coinciding with what can be done, and this also means that flexibility is understood as adaptation to the environment. Priority should, however, consist of giving the floor to the individual, in a historical spirit in which the fragmentation of the working context is not indifferent to the fragmentation of the Self – even Richard Sennett with *The Flexible Man* (1999) warned that flexibility could lead to corrosion of the Ego.

If the work dimension has a very significant definition of Self and the educational task can be considered above all to teach individuals how to cultivate their own desires, it is important to note not only the presence of so many professional biographies characterized by discontinuities in choices, providing that the responsibility for these is almost entirely on the individual; therefore, retrieving the pedagogical dimension of guidance can mean educationally working on those that are two key concepts of navigation in the society of complexity, as well as two pedagogical words: narratives and project.

The last dimension, but not for its importance, is that of counseling, which is a methodological and educational interpretation of guidance that contributes to changing visions, re-activating resources, and imagining new paths. Counseling is understood here as a methodological agent for the re-definition of design in demanding situations. Working with others can be seen as a critical approach in the sense of an obstacle analysis, an examination of reality in which dif-

difficulties are found, ways of seeing inadequate ones that constrain the achievement of objectives, and, at the same time, a 'clinical' recovery of one's own history, experiences and past, and then of research and the accomplishment of desires. In the foreground, from a methodological point of view, the narrative approach and reflexivity are considered exquisitely pedagogical dimensions. Guidance is understood here as educational counseling, i.e., as one form of counseling (Simeone 2002) and methodological accompaniment that creates the conditions for activation and a full expression of the abilities of choice. Also to the fore are the ways in which individuals live their relational universes to allow for an exploration of what, for example, characterizes or hinders the realization of personal expressive and existential incentives, and the descent into the realm of desire, anchoring them to their own story, to their own identity manifestations. This perspective of counseling represents a significant ramification of the guidance theme in the international literature (Savickas 2005, 2002; Guichard 2010, 2005), and is a useful key to methodological and educational perspectives on guidance.

In the international context, the dimensions of caring and being cared for have been designed specifically with reference to work choices, with a view to making them synchronic to individual propensities and transformations of those individuals' existential paths; in general, it is no longer the environment that guides occupational and professional choices favouring the expression and realization of individual specificities, but individuals who are helped to become aware of themselves and their desires (Savickas 2011, 2001). The accompaniment of people to reflect on their subjectivity which manifests in the different aspects of existence, fully reflects the work of the Self according to evolutionary circularity and self-emancipation; life-designing counseling therefore looks at individuals in all their complexity and tension to impress coherence and design vitality on the various roles and functions, supporting them above all in the most critical moments of transformation (Guichard, Di Fabio 2010, Savickas *et al.* 2009).

4. Conclusion

The Neapolitan section of the PRIN research looked at the role of guidance processes in creating the education of students in higher education, highlighting, specifically, the importance of combining the dimensions of meaning, continuity, and change, in other words, the development, structuring and permanence of the Self and, above all, experimenting with possible educational itineraries. If it is the

quality of educational experiences that are promoted to make a strong impact on people's guidance processes, it is essential to accompany educational processes in all the contexts where they occur, also by identifying emerging pedagogical questions on guidance that can also become research questions beyond education, to then try to create and test possible pedagogical and guidance responses.

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