

THE GROUP AS AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE IN GUIDANCE PROCESSES

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to see what happens when reflective practice is used in a guidance intervention made with a group. Fifty university students took part in 3 focus group sessions during which they could discuss the issue of guidance and the choices and construction of a life plan. The results show a clear perception of wellness and usefulness in the educational experience, based on the possibility of knowing oneself, comparing oneself with others, activating systematic reflection on oneself and promoting change.

KEYWORDS: guidance, focus group, reflexivity, higher education.

1. Group guidance

The construction of a life plan involves reflective processes that support the individual in exploring the perceived possibilities and in the critical connection between internal instances – needs, wishes, aspirations – and the demands that life contexts impose (Cunti, Priore, Bellantonio 2015). Today, thinking and designing the future means risking, exploring the unknown, putting up with uncertainty, but also desiring, hoping, and choosing; all prerogatives that make the future a human time (Morace 2013), therefore, a time to educate, turning to the subjects that are projected towards it. Experimenting and cultivating choice in training venues allows individuals to prepare themselves in the presence of the need to have to suddenly choose, and in the most critical transition phases, where they can feel disarmed and occasionally exploited. The educational task, then, comes to develop learning paths that promote a capacity to manage the Self in relation to change (Cunti 2015), to provide resources that enable students to choose properly. In fact, individual choices need to be the object of a reflection process (Schön 1987) that supports critical learning and cultural education. On the application side, this involves the use of techniques and instruments that assume a guiding value by making students aware of themselves through a continuous construction and re-construction of their personal story (Savickas *et al.* 2010), which may allow them to congruently connect personal features and their educational and professional choices (Lo Presti 2010; Loiodice 2009; Cunti 2008; Domenici 2003; Pombeni 1996).

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The aim of this paper is to investigate what happens when this reflective exercise finds space and is cultivated in a guidance intervention carried out in a group context. The guidance practice, arranged in this way, attributes centrality to the subject through a work of Self on Self (Foucault 1985) that is mediated by others and is therefore based on the idea that such a work can be better valued by the individual when supported by others. In other words, the key guidance capability, i.e., the critical management of Self, is considered to be valued and integrated by individuals when they are supported by other listeners and interlocutors, when they are involved in a discussion, when they reflect themselves in others to know themselves better; indeed, the actual potentialities of an individual can be traced starting from the perspective of others: personal identity is built through a constructive discussion with the experience of others, but only when the intimate dimension exceeds the social one. From an educational point of view, this implies setting out conditions and strategies to ensure that the internal aspects, who we are, how we represent ourselves, what we think, who we wish to become, meet the external aspects, the whole group, its participants, their experience, but above all, the opportunity to swap experiences on common ground.

From this perspective, the group, with its relational and interactive dimension, may thus prefigure itself as a precious resource to trigger that critical reflexive leap (Guichard, Pouyaud 2015) useful, if not essential, to produce alternative ideas and possible solutions (Krueger, Casey 2000; Duggleby 2005). The sense of plurality that characterizes everyday life is thus reproduced inside the group in its wide range of perspectives, aspects that make it productive and functional; in the words of Usher and Edwards (2005), the efficacy of guidance consists in eliciting one's self as an object of knowledge, but situated inside an actors' network.

In a pedagogical perspective of guidance, the group (Di Nubila 2008; Venza 2007) is thus interpreted as an educational setting in which to construct meaning about experiences that belong to the individual members, and to lay the foundations of personal life plans; conflict, but also the mutual care that characterizes the creation of a group and the deployment of their work, will be the humus of that meaningful and potentially transformative learning (Mezirow 2003) so necessary for individual development.

The methodological choice of group guidance therefore includes the perspective that the group represents a positive setting, facilitating the activation of processes such as decentralization, comparison, cognitive conflict, and hence the development of transverse skills (Ladogana, Cardone, Mansolillo 2015). Should we like to view the group as a way to cope with critical issues, we can identify in its ho-

mogeneity (Pombeni, D'Angelo 1994), at least in terms of the needs shared by the participants, an element of efficacy in achieving common goals. Although the uniqueness of individual experiences distinguishes and offers different points of view and perspectives of meaning to various issues, the group remains centred on a common task that identifies and makes the various participants resemble one another. In fact, this mechanism facilitates the opportunity to feel closer to one's own views, positions, and ideas that would never be considered alone. The group thus becomes an instrument that can activate critical-divergent thinking, a learning opportunity that finds its foundation in experiential and relational aspects rather than in intellectual knowledge, as so often happens.

Such a guidance experiment implies a twofold function: on the one hand, it activates critical exercises addressed to self-management in choice systems, on the other, it is proposed as a privileged context of socio-emotional and relational experimentation in which to locate and verify operating modes which, in the working context, are considered functional and productive; suffice to think of team-working in which cooperation (Kagan 2000; Kaye 1992) is based on skill in managing differences and conflicts.

The group, as a mental space for discussing subjective experiences, offers the chance to increase the ability to find connections between themes and experiences, between stories and meanings, but also the forms of adaptation between internal and external dimensions. The complex dynamics that generically characterize each group, but above all the specific guidance aim that is discussed, depend especially on the role played by the moderator. The latter has the complex task of catalysing the group's performance by working on transformative thoughts through feedback, reflecting but also emancipating; assembling, reorganizing, translating, reviving, and interpreting the participants' interventions. These represent some basic steps that lead a working group to generate critical-reflective thought (Schön 1987).

2. Educational research with University Students

Fifty university students (divided into four groups), enrolled in various active three-year Degree Courses at the universities involved in the national research project, took part in 3 focus group sessions (Merton, Kendal 1946) during which participants could discuss and exchange views on the guidance issue.

In this research phase, it was decided to involve the users of university guidance services, i.e. students, with the aim of achieving the following research objectives: identifying their guidance needs; the

individual and deeper aspects underlying their choices and life planning; possible guidance strategies to respond to these.

However, when it came to the educational objectives, the focus group was assembled with the aim of supporting the participants in acquiring greater awareness regarding the choices and construction of a life plan, by galvanizing critical-reflexive thought.

The structure of the focus group sessions was inspired by the way Savickas and Hartung (2012) organized the production of the career story according to the famous formula 'Telling-Hearing-Enacting My Story', which in the case of this research was adapted to the educational story which becomes a life plan.

The themes discussed during the 3 sessions related to the meaning in life, also through narrative education and the presence of significant institutional figures or family/friends, choices, transitions, and changes, of the questions; «Who am I?» and «Who will I become?», starting from the way each subject was located on his or her own educational path; the calling, how, whether, and what aspects and factors would make it changeable. Such themes supported the participants in reflecting together on the sense of university guidance, their deeper guidance needs, personal learning experiences, and identifying potential solutions and strategies through which the university as an institution could support their educational paths with specific guidance.

The reflective instruments used during the focus sessions were narration, metaphor, and brainstorming.

All the data gathered, the methodological choices, and the results will be collected in subsequent publications; here we have chosen to investigate aspects of evaluating the path, and possible changes experienced by the students. To this end, the participants were given an evaluation questionnaire centred on organizational elements, content, and method, and the student's personal change.

The questionnaire consisted of a closed-response part that contained a series of statements to which the student was asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert-like scale (*Not at All, Somewhat, Moderately, Quite a Bit, Very Much*) or dichotomously (*Yes, No*); with an open narrative part that asked the students to discuss more deeply the evaluation of the path they were participating in. As a last point, the students were asked to fill out the questionnaire anonymously to avoid only desirable answers.

Turning, instead, to a general evaluation of the course the students were attending, there was a clear sense of wellbeing and of the usefulness of the educational experience: in fact, all the students said that they 'felt good', considered participation in the project useful, and would recommend it to other students. When the students were

asked to explain the reasons behind their evaluation of the course as something useful for themselves, they referred to dimensions such as:

- self-knowledge («it allows you to evaluate aspects of yourself to which little importance is given»; «it encourages you to discover your identity»; «so I can know myself better»);
- comparison with others («you can listen to the experiences of others»; «you compare yourself with other people's stories»);
- reflexivity as systematic reflection («it helps you to reflect on yourself»; «there's a need to reflect on yourself»; «it's useful to find new ideas to think about»);
- planning («it helps you make choices about your educational path»; «useful for understanding the goals you want to achieve»; «useful for clarifying your ideas»);
- change («useful for understanding where to start to promote positive change»).

The reasons why the students would recommend that others participate in projects of this type were along the same lines. The categories that emerged in this regard highlighted the possibility of:

- understanding the value of guidance («it makes you understand the usefulness of guidance, which is often undervalued»; «I would recommend it to confused university students because it helps you to think about yourself and to understand»);
- in-depth self-analysis («we don't always have the chance to analyse ourselves deeply»; «useful for personal reflection»);
- comparing oneself with others («good experiences for sharing opinions and reflections»; «a way to get to know other people»; «helps you understand the lives of others»);
- a stimulating experience («it was an interesting and fun experience»; «I had fun»; «very useful and stimulating»).

The students' description of their experience was summarized in the following categories:

- path of awareness («a positive experience that leads to greater awareness of yourself and your choices»; «it helps us dig deeply into ourselves»);
- development path of people and their potential («it helps you improve yourself and understand how to do it»; «addressing important issues for the development of people and their potential»);
- active participation course («a course in which you analyse issues to find solutions to university and guidance problems»; «a good way to feel active in the university»; «discussion of some concepts to understand university guidance and make it more effective»);
- a reflective course («it helps you pause a moment to think about yourself»; «it's a very reflective course»).

At the end of the sessions the students were asked if they had suggestions for improving the guidance path they had followed together, but only 39% proposed improvements, which can be categorized as follows:

- organizational proposals (avoid meetings during exams; schedule meetings at the beginning and end of the academic year; plan more meetings);
- methodological proposals (list the topics before the meeting and give students time for pre-reflection; explain the goals better; discuss more issues).

As for the involvement of the students during the focus groups, the responses revealed that about 66% said they felt 'very much' involved and about 34% 'quite a bit' involved; while to the question «Did something change in you?» 65% of the students said Yes and, for example, justified their answers in this way:

Previously, the question «Who am I?» was obvious and superficial. Now it has a deeper meaning, and, for this reason, I no longer know how to respond.

I am more convinced about myself as a person and student because I have understood more.

I felt useful in raising the awareness of the institutions to address the problem proactively.

The importance of guidance.

I feel more aware of past choices and the author of future ones.

From now on, I will no longer make too-hasty choices.

I have a clearer picture for orienting myself in the future and new insights.

3. *Final remarks*

Considering the recent theoretical models that have emerged in the literature (Savickas 2015, 2005, 2002; Guichard 2012, 2010, 2005), but also starting from the simple point of view of emerging adults engaged in constructing their own educational and professional path, guidance means educating people to become more flexible and critical observers of themselves and their personal story. In this process, group work is set up as an educational instrument and a condition which, through comparison with others, allows people to intercept and recognize with greater clarity deep aspects of themselves. The passage from 'us' to 'me' and vice versa, typical of group dynamics (Bion 1961; Lewin 1948), and the result of proceeding through reflection, identification, projections and spacings that fuel the change of perspective on oneself and on the world and, as a result, open the construction of new meanings to attribute to experience.

The theme of the choices and the recursive transitions (Boffo, Gioli 2016; Guichard, Di Fabio 2010) appears redundant in the participants' narratives, and is described as an element that pervasively characterizes their life paths, in that, although, on the one hand, it represents an opportunity for personal growth and the education of the person, on the other, it seems to be experienced in negative terms, i.e., as a weight to carry on the shoulders and a moment of difficulty to cope with. It is often associated with a sense of obligation, conditioning by others, renunciation, and especially the absence of those fundamental aspects – knowledge, passions, interests – starting points to make decisions that consider both rational and emotional-affective aspects. In other words, choices assume profound meanings that transcend a simple selection from among different alternatives and therefore require greater attention from educational institutions.

In fact, although change and transition now represent a structural feature of a person's entire life cycle, those described in the narratives seemed to possess a potential criticality precisely due to the need to make choices that evidently also involved the resolution of conflicts with themselves and their surroundings. So, what seemed to have, at least in earlier decades, an evolutive potential for emancipatory change (transition as an exclusively positive event), is currently also characterized by a regressive character, procrastination, and/or stagnation. It is therefore necessary to rethink traditional guidance practices, intended in a diagnostic sense and focusing on linear paths of life, to try to respond to subjects' need to reflect and know themselves, allowing for the dimensions of plurality and flexibility.

In this framework, group guidance could represent a valid proposal, an opportunity to experiment and consciously cultivate choices within a cooperative learning process in which everyone leaves and takes something from comparison with others. Group guidance means focusing on an individual's psycho-social resources, recognizing that each transition, decision, and project belongs to the individual, but is inevitably negotiated with others.

The passage we wish to highlight is one which, from guidance based on an individualized approach, then tends to the construction of knowledge based on interpersonal, social, and cultural factors. The efficacy of the proposal is traceable in the perceived change, reported by the students, which, although not generalizable, finds in the possibility of implementability and transferability in other contexts, a future prospect of research and education. The key element reported by the students is that they were fazed and surprised by how the stories and their meanings, nowadays given as certain, through the group took on a new light, and might steer their ideas on the future in a different direction.

To conclude, the function of the group in guidance interventions is to re-create, in a protected mode, an «episode of social life» (Usher, Edwards 2005: 407), and to emphasize the network and the relationship between the actors, hence, the production of interrelated and dialogic knowledge.

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