# Doing educational guidance: An opportunity to foster inclusive processes. Outcomes of an exploratory survey

Fare orientamento a scuola: una opportunità per favorire i processi inclusivi. Esiti di un'indagine esplorativa

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Double blind peer review

**Citation**: Guerini, I. (2023). Doing educational guidance: An opportunity to foster inclusive processes. Outcomes of an exploratory survey. *Pedagogia oggi*, 21(2), 155-161.

https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-022023-18

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#### Journal Homepage

https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/siped

Pensa MultiMedia / ISSN 2611-6561 https://doi10.7346/PO-022023-18

#### **ABSTRACT**

Educational guidance constitutes a significant topic in the pedagogical field. In particular, it represents a leading issue for all those students at greater risk of dropping out of school who, in fact, seem destined to live in material and educational poverty. The so-called "leap into the void" is sadly known to the parents of disabled students who, at the end of school, feel abandoned realising that they have not succeeded in constructing their children's life project.. The paper starts from the educational guidance experience of six classes at four schools participating in the "Next Generation" project – financed under the PNRR by the Ministry of University and Research – in order to promote conscious choices in students about their future. It then analyses the results of the exploratory survey carried out in parallel and tries to explore viable routes within the increasingly necessary *support network* for students with special educational needs.

L'orientamento costituisce un tema rilevante nell'ambito della pedagogia, in particolare rappresenta una questione preminente per tutti quegli studenti a maggior rischio di dispersione scolastica che, di fatto, sembrano destinati a divenire protagonisti di forme di povertà materiale ed educativa. Il cosiddetto "salto nel vuoto" è tristemente noto ai genitori di studenti con disabilità che al termine della scuola si sentono abbandonati, realizzando di non aver partecipato alla costruzione del progetto di vita dei propri figli. Il contributo muove dall'esperienza di orientamento condotta in sei classi appartenenti a quattro scuole tra quelle aderenti al progetto "Next Generation" (finanziato nell'ambito del PNRR dal Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca) al fine di promuovere negli studenti scelte consapevoli sul loro futuro. Discute, quindi, gli esiti dell'indagine esplorativa parallelamente compiuta con gli studenti partecipanti provando a esplorare itinerari percorribili all'interno della sempre più necessaria rete di sostegni per gli studenti con bisogni educativi speciali.

Keywords: educational guidance | school | inclusive processes | life project | pedagogical professionals

Parole chiave: orientamento | scuola | processi inclusivi | progetto di vita | professionalità pedagogiche

Received: September 1, 2023 Accepted: October 29, 2023 Published: December 29, 2023

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#### 1. Introduction

In recent years, education guidance has been assuming considerable importance not only in the scientific sphere but also in the political one. In this regard, we think at the current regulation concerning the launching of guidance projects in the last classes of upper secondary schools financed by the Ministry of University and Research and aimed at promoting conscious choices in students relating to their future and therefore to reduce university studies abandonment (DM n. 934/2022). Moreover, we think at the decision to launch an educational guidance training course<sup>1</sup> for teachers who are chosen by the School Headmaster as school and guidance tutors for upper secondary school students (DM n. 328/2022; DM n.63/2023; CM n.958/2023) in order to accompany them in their future life choices.

These policies (obviously with their following practices) seem to be going in the direction repeatedly emphasised by the research of implementing a diachronic-formative guidance rather than a synchronic-final one (Domenici, 1998; Chiappetta Cajola, 2015; Dainese, 2017). This is a very relevant pedagogical issue for today's generations, which are increasingly the protagonists of phenomena such as school dropout and/or university studies abandonment (Canevaro, 1976; Benvenuto, 2016; Marsano & Bocci, 2018).

In particular, educational guidance represents a leading issue for all those students who usually are labelled as "vulnerable" (think at students with disability or other special educational needs) and for whom educational guidance often ends with the advisement to enrol in vocational schools<sup>2</sup> (Canevaro & Ianes, 2015; Caldin & Friso, 2022; Guerini, 2022) of which students generally drop out (Stillo, 2022). This attitude hinders the development of self-determination in students with special educational needs and seem to respond to a sort of pre-written destiny that sees them living as adults in a material as well as in educational poverty (Guerini, 2020a). In particular, students with disability usually have few opportunities to relate to peers. An absence which obviously negatively affects their identity process and the development of their self-determination.

What is lacking is a consideration of students' life project, especially those with disabilities. In fact, they usually feel disoriented much more than other students (Mura, 2018) and at the end of the upper secondary school their families are faced with the so-called "leap into the void" (Giaconi, 2015; Giaconi et alii, 2020). Students with disability and their parents feel abandoned by educational institutions and families realise that they have not succeeded in constructing their children's life path.

In order for this not to happen, it is necessary that a real *support network* for students with disability is established from the earliest years of childhood, working in synergy and with a view to the development of each student's identity process (Canevaro, 2019; Cesaro, 2015; Bianquin & Bulgarelli, 2022).

Within the aforementioned support network, specialised support teachers and Autonomy and Communication Assistants certainly play a *pivotal role* (Cottini, 2014) for at least two reasons. Firstly, they are pedagogical professionals who spend more time with students with disabilities than other professional figures (such as, for example, common teachers or medical assistants) and, consequently, they know students better than others and know how to approach pupils in order to forge positive alliances in view of building their own life project. Secondly, as professionals, they possess knowledge and skills capable of steering them in a meaningful educational activity. Think, for example, of the importance that observations made by support teachers as well as the usefulness of information coming from Autonomy and Communication Assistants play in the drafting of the Individual Education Plans (IEP). Again, think of the work that both the aforementioned pedagogical professionals (albeit with different roles) carry out on a daily basis with pupils with disability so that students do not just attend school but truly experience that educational space as an opportunity to develop their own identity through relationships with others (classmates, teachers and all the other figures that make up the school community).

In line with the above-mentioned theoretical framework, this paper describes an experience of educational guidance conducted in six classes of four upper secondary schools in Rome. The analysis of the re-

<sup>1</sup> The course is named "OrientaMenti" which in Italian represents a wordplay between the words "Orientamento" (literally "educational guidance") and "Menti" (meaning the "students' minds" which obviously benefit from the educational guidance experience).

<sup>2</sup> Which are prejudicially considered easier than other schools (Mannese, 2019).

sults<sup>3</sup> of the exploratory survey carried out in parallel with the students participating to the educational guidance experience is also presented in the paper.

# 2. "Who am I and who will I become". An experience of educational guidance

Within the "Next Generation" educational guidance project financed under the PNRR by the Ministry of University and Research, we<sup>4</sup> have designed for the last classes of the upper secondary schools in region Lazio (among those participating feat Roma Tre University in the project) a workshop activity which makes use of technology as a tool to approach the youngest and create an inclusive environment.

"Who am I and who will I become" is the name of the experience we run in six classes at four schools in Rome which totally involved 111 students. The objective of the activity was twice. Firstly, students had to reflect together on their own present and future telling which work they would like to do as adults. The second aim related to learn to reflect on their own choices and abilities in order to re-guide themselves if needed.

The workshop activity was designed on the basis of the Open Education Methodology<sup>6</sup> (Peschel, 2006a, 2006b; Demo, 2015; Guerini, 2020b, 2023), which can be defined as "a movement that brings together heterogeneous conceptualisations and teaching practices that have in common the fact of more or less radically questioning traditional teaching-learning practices" (Jürgens, 2009, p. 24). *Free work, stations work, weekly agenda* and *project-based teaching* constitute the four types through which it is possible to work with Open Education.

In the workshop activity, we designed for the educational guidance experience, we adopted the stations work. More specifically, a digital stations activity reachable by students' smartphones through "Mentimeter" was created. By using this app, has made possible the creation of an inclusive environment, accessible to all students involved. In particular, thinking of the meagre spaces generally found in Italian school classrooms and of the possibility of encountering students with physical disabilities and/or students who, due to different characteristics, preferred to express themselves in written form (even possibly by means of a drawing) rather than in oral form, we chose to use the web (and not the physical school space as usually happens by Open Education) for the *compulsory route*<sup>7</sup> that made up the workshop.

Two stations were created for the compulsory route.

During station 1. students anonymously had to describe themselves just using three keywords or a picture or a metaphor to be posted on the Mentimeter wall<sup>8</sup> so that all pupils could see what their peers think about themselves. After this activity, two self-evaluation sheets (Mannese, 2019) were filled out by students. The first one was about their personal characteristics (with items investigating for instance students' self-determination, their capacity of interpersonal relation or their self-control). The second self-evaluation sheet was about students' own competences (with items investigating for instance students's manual abilities, their planning skills or their artistic ones). When filled, the answers given in the self-evaluation sheets were compared in groups of maximum three persons and then a final discussion with the trainer was run. Particular attention was given to explaining to the students how important it is to compare ourselves with others (peers in this case) in order to better understand our characteristics (what our strengths are and what we still need to work on), how we relate to others and how we appear to others. In fact, it often hap-

- 3 Some of the survey results were presented at REN Conference 2023.
- 4 As researcher of Roma Tre University and therefore trainer for the schools participating in the project.
- 5 We have specially decided to keep the same module name as in the Next Generation project.
- 6 This methodology has been using in German-speaking schools since the late 1970s but only recently in our country. As Demo (2016) points out, through Open Education students have more centrality in the learning process than what happens with the traditional didactics. Hence, by using Open Education Methodology a bigger sense of responsibility has also given to pupils.
- 7 In addition to the *compulsory route*, station work can be carried out by means of *free stations*, *compulsory stations in a free route* or by means of *a route with compulsory stations and free stations*.
- 8 If students wanted to use a picture found on the web or drawn themselves, they could do so via another virtual wall called "Linoit" and made accessible via a link posted on "Mentimeter".

pened that some students gave themselves a score of 3 on the self-determination item, but the comparison with their peers showed that they could have given themselves 5 points (i.e. the maximum).

During station 2. students – in groups of maximum three persons – interviewed each other about their future: they had to image and describe their life in 10/15 years.

In parallel to the above-discussed workshop activity and in order to detect its importance perceived by students an exploratory survey was carried out with them. In the next section, we will describe the Questionnaire filled out by the students at the end of the stations activity.

# 3. The exploratory survey

As already stated, we wanted to detect students' opinions and suggestions about the educational guidance experience they lived through the workshop activity. To this purpose the Questionnaire – which pupils anonymously filled out – contains 17 items aiming at investigating:

- the importance of the workshop activity perceived by them;
- students' evaluation of the workshop activity carried out;
- any previous students' participation at self-assessment and self-guidance meetings;
- any modification suggestions for the workshop activity students expressed;
- any previous students' experience with Open Education, Mentimeter and Linoit (which respectively
  were the methodology and the apps used during the workshop activity).

For what this paper concerns and in line with the aims of the educational guidance experience<sup>9</sup> we run, we focus our attention on the first three aspects investigated through the Questionnaire.

In relation to the workshop activity importance perceived by students, they were asked to specify if the activity they have just completed made them reflect on: a) their personal characteristics; b) their skills (what they can do); c) the course of study they wish to pursue after school; d) the work they want to do after school; e) the skills they still need to acquire. Moreover, students were asked to write down what did they learn through the workshop activity they participated to.

Concerning students' evaluation of the workshop activity carried out, students were firstly asked to rate the activity they did pointing out if it was: a) useful; b) interesting; c) useless; d) boring. Secondly, pupils were asked to rate the way in which the workshop activity was run specifying if it was: a) involving; b) original; c) boring; d) conventional. Thirdly, students had to rate the level of commitment required by the activity pointing out if it was: a) poor; b) adequate; c) excessive. At last, students were asked to specify through an agreement five points Likert Scale (completely agree; agree; neither agree nor disagree; completely disagree) if: a) the objectives of the workshop activity (stated by the trainer at the beginning of the activity) were achieved; b) the activity was organised to enable all students to fully participate in; c) the content of the workshop activity was well organised.

Regarding any previous participation of students at self-assessment and self-guidance meetings, students were firstly asked<sup>10</sup> to point out if they already attended a self-assessment and/or a self-guidance session. The possible answers were: a) yes, at school; b) yes, in my family; c) no, never; d) Other (with the possibility to write down something else in order to specify their previous experience of self-assessment and/or the self-guidance). Secondly, students were asked to state the tools used during the self-assessment and/or the self-guidance meetings they previously attended pointing out if they were: a) questionnaires; b) interviews with psychologists; c) workshop groups activity mediated by trainers such as the one just run; d) Other (with the possibility to write down something else in order to specify tools used during the self-assessment and/or the self-guidance meetings they previously attended).

- 9 As stated in the previous section, two were the objectives of the workshop activity. Firstly, let students reflect on their own present and their future job. Secondly, let pupils think about their own choices and abilities in order to re-guide themselves if needed.
- 10 Through two different items.

The sample consists of 111 students obviously belonging to the six classes of the four upper secondary schools (in Rome) among those participating feat Roma Tre University in the "Next Generation" educational guidance experience.

The results of the descriptive analysis made on data collected by the Questionnaire will be presented in the next section.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

During data analysis, the attention was paid to detect what the workshop activity has produced in the students in order to help them make conscious choices about their future. For this reason, we also wanted to understand if they have already participated in any self-assessment and self-guidance meetings.

Concerning this last aspect, data analysis shows that most students had already participated in one (or more) self-assessment and self-guidance sessions. In particular, 60 students stated to have attended other self-assessment meetings at school (n= 52) or in their own family (n= 8). At the same time, 59 students affirmed to have already participated in self-guidance sessions at school (n= 56) or in their own family (n= 3). Both for the self-assessment and for the self-guidance meetings questionnaires represent the mostly used tool (n= 49 in self-assessment meetings; n= 39 in self-guidance sessions). Just a low number of students (n= 10 for the self-assessment meetings; n= 13 for the self-guidance ones) has already participated in a workshop groups activity mediated by a trainer such as that they attended through the "Next Generation" educational guidance experience.

In relation to the effects of the workshop activity, from data analysis emerges it was useful for most students in order to reflect on their own personal characteristics (n= 98), on their own personal skills (n= 91) and on the future university course (n= 70). For just over half of students (56 on 111) the workshop activity was not useful to reflect on the skills they still need to acquire.

Regarding students' evaluation of the workshop activity carried out, 73 on 111 students stated it was *interesting*; the other 38 affirmed the activity was *useful* (n=22), *useless* (n=3) and *boring* (n=13). Concerning the way, the workshop activity was run, it was *involving* (n=55) and *original* (n=33) according most students. The other ones described the workshop's mode as *boring* (n=11) and *conventional* (n=12). With regard to the level of commitment required by the workshop activity, almost all students stated it was *adequate* (n=98), the other 13 affirmed it was *poor*.

In relation to the objectives of the workshop activity – stated by the trainer at the beginning of the activity – 68 on 111 students agree (*completely agree*= n 14; agree= n 54) they were achieved. Moreover, most students (*fully agree*= n 48; agree= n 53) stated the workshop was organized to allow all of them to fully take part in. Finally, 94 on 111 students affirmed the content of the workshop activity was well organized (*fully agree*= 41; agree= 53).

The fact the workshop was digitally conducted has certainly engaged students more in the activities. In fact, most pupils stated the activity was interesting as well as involving and original was the way it was carried out.

Nevertheless, according to just over half of students the workshop activity was not useful to reflect on skills they still need to acquire in order to make conscious choices for their future. This latter aspect – even if the small sample does not make data generalized – seems to be particularly relevant within the educational guidance field. In fact, if the aim of educational guidance at school is to support students in making choices regarding their future (also in order to reduce the number of school and/or university drop-out), it is clear that the amount of hours allocated to projects such as those advocated by the PNRR must be increased<sup>11</sup>. Another finding from the survey also seems to point in this direction, namely that students have already experienced opportunities for self-assessment and self-guidance exclusively through the use of questionnaires. On the other hand, as emerges from our survey itself, being able to compare

<sup>11</sup> There are currently 15 hours dedicated to educational guidance at school with the "Next Generation" project. The hours are spread over five days for 3 hours a day. Hence, the module we conducted only included 3 hours of educational guidance activities.

oneself with one's peers using the mediation of trainers is crucial for the development of one's own identity (especially for students with disability or other special educational needs who usually have few opportunities to relate to peers) in order to understand what they have in common and obviously their own weaknesses and strengths.

#### 5. Conclusions

Through this paper we wanted to present an educational guidance experience we run in four upper secondary schools in Rome and to reflect on some data emerged from the exploratory survey conducted with the students participating in orientation activities in order to understand whether and to what extent the activity was useful to them.

By using Mentimeter app it has made possible to create a context easily accessible to all. Since we did not know the characteristics of the students we were going to meet, we decided (following the Universal Design for Learning approach) to create an online context in which students would be able to express themselves through written form or through a drawing they made or a picture found on the web. This made the students perceive the activity as inclusive and certainly engaging.

The fact students state they still need to reflect on the skills they have not yet acquired invites us to think about the importance of such projects continuing to exist (also, as mentioned, by increasing the number of hours allocated to them). Turning the gaze towards students with disabilities, we consider it useful to involve specialised support teachers in similar projects. In this regard, we wish the educational guidance training course (CM n.958/2023) for teachers goes in this direction. At the same time and also in the light of the draft law for the stabilization of the Autonomy and Communication Assistants (Disegno di Legge 236/2023) within school staff, we think it is important they also have/acquire skills relating to educational guidance. We therefore hope that in the future the educational guidance training course (CM n.958/2023) could be attended also by Autonomy and Communication Assistants or otherwise be offered them to attend further training courses on educational guidance. This is not to fuel the phenomenon of delegation but because, as mentioned in the Introduction, we consider specialised support teachers and Autonomy and Communication Assistants as pedagogical professionals capable of creating an effective support network which can work for the construction of truly viable life projects for young people with disabilities.

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