

Pedagogical reflection on university dropout and good internship practices for the university well-being of future educators and pedagogists

Riflessione pedagogica sulla dispersione universitaria e buone prassi di tirocinio per il benessere universitario dei futuri educatori e pedagogisti

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ABSTRACT

In 2021/2022, Italy recorded a university dropout rate of 7.3%, marking an increase compared to the previous year (MUR data). Faced with this evidence, pedagogical reflection questions not only the causes of this dropout but also commits to planning actions, both corrective and preventive, at a European level. The phenomenon of dropout cannot solely be attributed to study courses but also involves career paths. This unexpected trend has increasingly become a widespread practice: resigning serves as a means to prevent exploitation and deterioration of personal and relational health. Questioning these phenomena places university well-being at the forefront, addressing both the personal well-being of the student and their future professional prospects. Reflecting on the university well-being of tomorrow's pedagogists and educators presents an opportunity to comprehend the phenomenon and design support and prevention measures.

Nell'anno 2021/2022 si è registrato in Italia un tasso di abbandono universitario del 7,3% in crescita rispetto all'anno precedente (dati MUR). A fronte di queste evidenze la riflessione pedagogica si interroga, anche a livello europeo, non solo sulle cause di questo dropout, ma si impegna a progettare azioni, non solo correttive ma anche preventive. Il fenomeno dell'abbandono non è da ascrivere ai soli percorsi di studi, coinvolgendo anche le carriere lavorative. Tale tendenza inattesa è divenuta pratica sempre più diffusa: dimettersi rappresenta uno strumento mediante il quale impedire sfruttamento e deterioramento della salute personale e relazionale. Interrogarsi su questi fenomeni pone il benessere universitario come centrale sia per il well-being personale dello studente che del futuro professionista. Riflettere sul benessere universitario dei pedagogisti ed educatori di domani, tra riconoscimento sociale ed esigenza di un albo professionale tutelante, rappresenta un'occasione per comprendere il fenomeno e progettare azioni di supporto e prevenzione.

Keywords: pedagogical reflection | university dropout | tutorship | well-being | good practices

Parole chiave: riflessione pedagogica | dispersione universitaria | tutorship | benessere | buone prassi

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Introduction

The data released by the Ministry of University and Research in May 2023 illustrates the phenomenon of university dropouts as a growing trend. In the years 2021/2022, a university dropout rate of 7.4% for male matriculants and 7.2% for female matriculants was recorded in Italy, compared to 7.2% and 7.0% for the years 2020/2021: this data is the result of information collected by the different universities at the end of the academic year. Although this data may be affected by the influences of the pandemic period, which recorded a boom in registrations, the problem that emerged urges pedagogical reflection to question the contours of the phenomenon. However, concrete and systemic actions must be associated with the reflective framework, such as strengthening guidance actions, study support, and tutorship.

Among the forms of intervention is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, a strategic program developed to address the economic and social challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and to promote the economic recovery and resilience of the country (Malavasi, 2022). Specifically, mission 4 'Education and research' aims to combat school dropout through a series of interventions aimed at improving access to education and creating a more inclusive and stimulating academic environment. The PNRR's attention to school dropout highlights how this phenomenon produces long-term negative consequences both for individuals and for society as a whole, contributing to limiting job opportunities, increasing social inequalities, and hindering personal development and well-being. Even different goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be brought closer to the topic of university dropouts. Goals such as: 4 - Quality education; 8 - Decent work and economic growth; 10 - Reduce inequalities; 17 - Partnership for the objectives contribute to combating university dropout. The reduction of university dropouts is also an objective at a European level, in reports such as 'Dropout and Completion in Higher Education in Europe' (2015) and 'European Semester Thematic Factsheet' (2016), a rate of achievement of the final qualification of 39.1% of young Europeans, indicating Belgium, Greece, France, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia as the countries with the highest dropout rate and entering the world of work as the primary motivation. This framework led the European Commission to invest in the Higher Education agenda (2017) and in the Europe 2020 Strategy to ensure that 40% of European students aged between 30 and 34 achieve a degree (European Commission, 2015). Reinforcing the urgency of intervening on university dropouts are the 2022 Istat data relating to the correlation between qualifications and employability; among those under 35 (with qualifications obtained within 1 to 3 years), the employment rate is growing up to 74.6% among graduates (+6.6 and +7.1 points compared to 2021), exceeding the level reached before the 2008 crisis by 4 points (Istat, 2022). It's crucial to study the dropout phenomenon to identify factors and indicators, in order to be able to plan adequate preventive and recovery actions, which combine systemic and synergistic approaches between disciplines and institutions. Intervening on university dropout rates becomes strategic for acting on the careers and well-being of tomorrow's professionals.

1. The framework of the university dropout phenomenon

The phenomenon of dropout is composite and complex: in fact, it's difficult to delimit its boundaries in a univocal manner, even though many disciplines and scholars have attempted to search for a definition. The dialogue between different sciences takes crucial importance to effectively address the educational theme; in particular, the dialogue with other human sciences, such as psychology and sociology, represents an opportunity for fundamental reflection and action to return to the ethical foundations that move the training action:

The educational sociologist studies the effects of training on social behaviors, the psychologist captures and analyzes, in the field of development, the affective elements which can also influence the learning processes, however, it is up to the Social Pedagogy specialist to study types and models of educational intervention, capturing the social value of instruction and education (Gramigna, 2003, p. 33).

An approach that combines pedagogy, psychology, and sociology represents an opportunity to avoid falling into a purely 'curative' view of the dropout problem focused only on contextual factors, allowing one to reflect and act on the methods and motivations underlying abandonment;

Sociological reflection emphasizes the importance of the conditions of the family and social context of belonging and the socio-relational assets available to the student in the decision to abandon, psychological reflection shows interest in the student's personality and focuses on the motivational aspects that accompany the university experience, pedagogical reflection favors the themes of the adequacy of students' cognitive and metacognitive skills and dysfunctions in advanced training processes (Burgalassi, 2019, p. 102).

It is useful and appropriate to focus on the 'itinerary' of the person, promoting the quality of the educational relationship and the systemic gaze on the person who abandons. The difficulty in unequivocally defining school dropout should not discourage the attempt to address the topic with empirical rigor. Finding even partial definitions helps scholars to question the shortcomings and the gray areas that need to be investigated without forgetting the person who is the substance of the data that we can read.

Usually, the term 'dropout' is used to designate the student who leaves school without completing the course of study he is attending, but it is a definition that presents several shortcomings. First, it does not indicate the existence of an internal variety within the category of pupils who leave school early (Liverta Sempio, 1999, p. 3).

The attempt to categorize school dropout, in the scientific literature of empirical research, is associated with conceiving the phenomenon as an evolutionary process that, therefore, occurs in a temporal succession of events leading to dropout. Conceiving a temporal sequence in the factors also allows for reflecting on the identification of predictive indicators of the phenomenon and intervening with preventive as well as corrective actions. Thinking about a possible modeling of dropout represents an attempt at categorization that allows us to understand the phenomenon through different approaches that aim to dissect the internal and external problems of the student, investigating what can also be predictive factors to allow the university system to intervene also preventatively and not only in the face of a clear risk. This attempt at categorization includes Bethencourt and Cabrera (*et alii*, 2008) who reflected on models and causes of success and failure in course of studies, defining the following models: of adaptation, in which abandonment is to be ascribed to a failure to integrate the student into the university environment and social and family implications are identified as the causes; structural, placing dispersion as the result of conflict between systems (political, social and economic), identifying institutional causes with contextual variables such as didactics and teaching; economist, in which abandonment arises from economic causes such as the need to work and the concomitant difficulty in meeting expenses; psychoeducational, in which dropout occurs due to characteristics relating to the educational and psychological dimensions of the student which may also be related to pre-university training or difficulties in adapting to the demands of the university in terms of competence, knowledge, autonomy, organization, and emotional management of the complex experience of academic life (Da Re, 2017).

Multiple universities have questioned, and are questioning, themselves about their dispersion rates and pedagogical reflection is prompted by the challenge of combining research on empirical data and the human dimension underlying it: this is cited as an explanation of the complexity underlying the topic, and without claiming to be exhaustive, in the research conducted by Clerici, Da Re, Giraldo, and Meggiolaro at the University of Padova in which it emerges that a multidimensional gaze is necessary to address the topic. Specifically, the research identifies four macro-categories of investigation: individual, family characteristics, characteristics of the student's university life, and psychological variables; which, although effective, need to consider the interpretative variables from a multi-dimensional perspective, also involving the reflection aspects such as «a self-regulated approach towards study/motivation and emotions» (Clerici, *et alii*, 2019, p. 97). Reflection on the topic has led, as reported by the studies of Zago, Giraldo, and Clerici, to consider a multilevel approach effective which also takes into account the university course in which the student is enrolled, since: "students enrolled in the same study course they face the same orga-

nizational context, the same teaching methods and the same support activities, which can influence their outcomes” (Zago, Giraldo, Clerici, 2014, p. 50).

This approach underlines how the complexity of the university dropout phenomenon cannot be ascribed only to the individual and relational interpretation of the individual but requires a systemic look at the university experience. While research on the topic continues, enriched by differentiated approaches and increasingly detailed tools, the difficulty remains in having a clear interpretation of the predictive factors of dropout:

Although there is substantial agreement in considering abandonment as a consequence of a lack of integration social and academic, the complexity of the phenomenon makes it difficult to establish unambiguously what are the decisive factors that intervene in its genesis and what their concatenation is (Burgalassi, p. 103).

The common point of many studies and reflections is to identify in the first year of university the main risk of an early abandonment, both because it requires modifying the relationship with the educational institution, which is more complex and free compared to secondary school, but also for the strong symbolic value in relation to the future, the assumption of responsibility and the implementation of choices, including differentiation from the family: «what takes shape in this passage, therefore, is a process of substantial autonomization of the ‘existence in which the risk of an early failure in terms of studies represents an eventuality that is anything but sporadic» (Domenici, 2009). Valuing the relational good represents an opportunity for pedagogical reflection to avoid an excessively individualized and ‘sanitized’ approach to dropout in favor of a systemic approach based on prevention rather than ad hoc care actions, supporting educational equality (Terenzi, 2006).

2. The great resignation and burnout: educational proposals for university well-being

In relation to the issue of employee departures, another significant phenomenon affecting various work sectors, particularly in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, is the so-called ‘Great Resignations’. This trend involves a significant number of employees deciding to leave their jobs within a short period and/or simultaneously, resulting in significant repercussions on organizations and the economic system.

There are numerous individual and systemic factors influencing this choice: workplace dissatisfaction, excessive stress, burnout, lack of professional growth opportunities, as well as changes in working conditions. The flexibility of remote working experienced during the pandemic has led many workers to prefer these methods and the accompanying freedom. Another significant factor underlying workplace departures is the reassessment of personal values prompted by the pandemic, leading to a substantial recalibration of personal priorities by seeking less stressful jobs that allow for the pursuit of different interests and passions, as well as striving for a better work-life balance (Coin, 2023). It is also evident from workers’ experiences how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the phenomenon of career departures, motivating both resignations and the quest for a renewed quality of life (<https://www.aidp.it/ricerche/>).

In this evolving social context, characterized by recurring fatigue, burnout, and subsequent departures in university and professional paths, it is pertinent to emphasize the concepts of well-being and quality of life as objectives to strive for in achieving a balance between internal and external demands. Shifting the focus to well-being as a desirable goal necessitates a paradigm shift involving cultural and social processes aimed at valuing individuals in their university and professional training courses (WHO, 1998). Taking an integrated approach, encompassing individual, social, and systemic aspects, encourages pedagogical reflection to implement structured educational actions promoting university well-being.

The initiatives found in many ‘University well-being’ programs range from physical to mental health interventions to actions promoting university engagement: promoting healthy lifestyles by offering support for physical activity, balanced nutrition, and stress management; addressing mental health issues through accessible and confidential psychological support and counseling services; raising awareness and preventing mental disorders through training programs and awareness-raising initiatives; fostering a sense of community and belonging through extracurricular activities, social events, the establishment of mentoring

programs, and the creation of social support networks; promoting policies and practices that ensure equitable access and inclusion for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, cultural heritage, abilities, or gender identity (European University for Well-being, <https://www.euniwell.eu>). In particular, training future professionals in the educational care relationship requires pedagogical reflection to adopt a heuristic perspective capable of establishing the ethical, educational, and communicative conditions conducive to empowerment and integration among various social stakeholders.

Reinvestment and regeneration are the keywords for redefining a system of responses that cannot remain anchored to outdated models. Moving from the welfare vision, understood as a unilateral and costly provision, to a mechanism for generating the same welfare (Iori, 2018, p. 13).

3. Educational prevention actions. Guidance, tutorship, mentoring

The repercussions of university dropout also reverberate in an inadequately prepared human capital introduced into a production system, risking stagnation and loss of innovation and dynamism, leaving job positions uncovered that require specific skills not possessed by the available workforce. By impacting dropout rates in the working and social sectors, it becomes necessary for pedagogical reflection to underscore the relevance of implementing systemic actions as well as planning personalized educational interventions. In the first instance, it is useful to distinguish between irregularities during studies and abandonment of the same, which entail different degrees of impact on the educational performance of the system. While irregularity, implying a delay in obtaining qualification, may not impact the productivity of the system, dispersion directly involves the training institution, leading it to question its actual effectiveness:

The existence of a high share of students who do not complete their course of study essentially opens the field to doubts about the real adequacy of the structure and organization of the system with respect to its educational missions (Burgalassi, 2019, p. 99).

It becomes a priority for pedagogical reflection to understand systemic and organizational shortcomings to act for inclusive renewal.

Among the priorities to be addressed are those connected to the necessary new perspectives with which to design training interventions, organize teaching and learning experiences, use tools and technologies in teaching, evaluate the processes and products of education, urgently needed (Elia, 2003, p. 13). From the literature on the topic, it emerges that to act effectively on the phenomenon of university dropouts, profiled actions by universities on the needs of their student body and systemic actions, including economic ones, are necessary. Mission 4 of the PNRR falls within this last line, through which active orientation and MUR allocations will be continuously strengthened to support tutorship projects. The contribution of the European Commission is placed within the framework of systemic intervention actions on university dropouts, which identifies a possible strategy of revaluing the university qualification as attractive and outlines four lines of intervention:

Accessibility and transparency of information on training opportunities, organization of personalized guidance in choosing, financial support for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, alignment between training and labor market needs (EU Commission, 2015).

Systemic actions must also be accompanied by reflections and then educational actions to support students at high risk of dropping out and preventing their exit. To take effective action, educational organizations must develop awareness of the complexity of factors involved in the dropout phenomenon and not become entrenched in consolidated practices. Innovating teaching by integrating it with different interaction tools and involving different university stakeholders is configured as a concrete action for student engagement. In this framework, reform 1.4 of the PNRR, titled 'Reform of the guidance system', focuses on restructuring or improving the guidance system in Italy. This involves various aspects such as educational or career guidance provided to students or individuals, reforms to the existing system of career counseling,

enhancing vocational training and job placement services, or other measures aimed at assisting individuals in making informed decisions about their education and career paths.

This reform is reflected in investment 1.6, called 'Active Orientation in the School-University Transition'. The measure aims to facilitate and encourage the transition from secondary school to university and to reduce the number of university dropouts, thereby contributing to an increase in the number of graduates. It is expected that, thanks to this investment, the values of success indicators (such as school attendance, improvement in learning levels, number of students admitted to the next academic year, etc.) will increase, and the gender gap will decrease, both in terms of employment and participation in higher education across all sectors. These initiatives, both indicative and concrete, aim to facilitate a more informed transition from upper secondary school to university, with the additional goal of reducing the dropout rate during the first year of university. Involving students within the university community represents an opportunity to prevent dropout, through varied strategic actions like: activating a system with pedagogical direction on support services in order to make them integrated into the curricular system, involving teachers by activating them in teaching counseling practices, integrating teaching monitoring figures (mentoring by senior students or PhD students), providing ad hoc psycho-pedagogical training for the technical-administrative staff who are in teaching support services (Clerici, Da Re, Giraldo, Meggiolaro, 2019). Multiple actions and student support strategies are united by an investigative will that is necessary to be foundational, meaning to start from identifying, and then meeting, the multiple needs that all students carry. Taking the starting point from the reflections on academic, personal, and didactic needs, and adding to them those related to: 'transition from secondary school to university, personal and social, and academic-professional' (Da Re, p. 37). Tutoring, specifically, should aim to integrate various aspects of students' developmental learning processes, affecting their social, academic, and vocational learning (Rodríguez Espinar, 1990). Tutorship was also effective in supporting the construction of a future professional identity and an effective study method (Piazza, Rizzari, 2020). Promoting self-assessment activities of one's abilities represents an opportunity to exercise reflection not only on one's status of acquired skills but also to question what one's study skills are (self-regulated study skills), bringing out and understanding those that can be studied support needs (Da Re). Tutoring and guidance can effectively be brought into dialogue with mentoring, counseling, and coaching practices, often characterized by a multidisciplinary approach. Mentoring focuses on the personal, social, and professional development of the student, emphasizing the importance of communication and empathetic exchange in a context that may not be strictly academic. In this regard, mentoring can integrate some of the training activities outlined in the study plan if it is formal mentoring. Conversely, informal mentoring may offer supportive actions that are not formally included in the study path (Sanz Oro, 2005). Specifically, tutorship and mentoring actions, which involve the support of students by individuals or groups capable of providing an educational approach throughout their university career, have proven to be highly effective in identifying at-risk positions for dropout and, at the same time, as an opportunity for empowerment (Da Re, 2017).

4. Competencies and pedagogical reflection for preventing university dropout

The complexity of the dropout issue, as outlined in the first paragraph, is essential to address in both research and action development phases. Having a strong awareness of the student before they drop out entails investing in a more competent professional of tomorrow, who is prepared to be effective, especially within an educational context. Training involves an investment in self-awareness and reflection, requiring the individual to be an 'artisan of themselves' by actively engaging in the process:

It is the subject, as an unrepeatable singularity, who commits themselves to a unique path, considering their resources, past experiences, and current reality that characterize the existential journey (Mariani, 2021, p. 20).

Stimulating and maintaining this desire for training is configured as an objective of pedagogical reflection concerning university dropouts and involves self-investment in the future, not only professional but also personal, which the student must want to make in themselves. A crucial role is played by guidance;

it is a process that encapsulates all planned experiences offered to the student and aimed at achieving their maximum development (Grimaldi, 2006). Considering orientation from a pedagogical perspective places it not only as a mere strategy for reducing dropout rates, but also as a process that involves the individual as the protagonist of designing their own life path (Boerchi, 2024). From a pedagogical standpoint, orientation cannot be simply categorized by following a series of phases but maintains over time a complex identity. What both pedagogical and psychological reflection have in common is the self-orienting dimension that has emerged thanks to the policies implemented since the 1960s, which aim to support the individual's right to decide autonomously by reasoning personal and professional life choices.

Orienting, therefore, means providing the individual with the cognitive, emotional, and relational tools that allow them to self-orient, that is, to define their life situation in relation to certain reference points and thus to decide from time to time the most suitable path to achieve the educational or professional goals they have set for themselves (Mancinelli, 2002, p. 6).

Pedagogical orientation can represent for university students an opportunity to educate towards well-being through reflective practices and self-formation, not relegating orientation to a sporadic or remedial intervention. Preferring an approach of accompaniment towards a conscious choice of a study path and, if necessary, re-orientation, through an interpretation and translation of the events that the individual enacts and towards the construction of a personal and professional project (Gargiulo Labriola, 2007).

Effective orientation allows students to align with the most suitable study path, addressing not only their aspirations but also their abilities, thereby reducing frustrations and the dropout rate (Mazzoli, 2021). Preventive guidance is also effective in relation to the large availability of degree courses that require a challenging change of mindset for students who have just finished secondary school (Piazza, Rizzari). Education professionals are required to possess skills, expertise, and methods, but also to possess and transmit reflective abilities. This framework of factors should never be perceived as separate but as integrated into the complexity of the educational relationship (Cambi, 2003). Identifying competence clearly helps to better understand the education horizon to aim for; we therefore speak of a competent person who can activate the same knowledge and skills within different contexts and at the same time combine them and translate them in a manner relevant depending on the contexts (Birbes, 2012). What emerges as relevant, for both the professionals of tomorrow and today's students, are not only theoretical-practical skills but also mastery of Soft Skills in a balanced way, those transversal expertise that can be used in different life contexts (Bornatici, 2020), and Life Comps "which can help people become more resilient and manage challenges and changes in their personal and professional lives in an ever-changing world" (European Commission, 2020). Valuing people by promoting their empowerment and university engagement represents opportunities for preventing university dropout and professional burnout. Therefore, it is fundamental for pedagogical reflection not to forget that the data, although relevant within the study of the phenomenon of dropout, is a manifestation of a person in difficulty. Addressing the issue of university dropouts without considering the human nature underlying the data would constitute a missed opportunity for inclusion and relationality. Taking care of the human, its relationships, and its unrepeatable singularity requires pedagogical reflection to "educate the feeling of the human, implying a fundamental choice to interpret what gives foundation to the choices that each of us makes every day" (Malavasi, 2020, p. XI).

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