

## The function of guidance with a view to valorising gender and ethnic-cultural differences

### La funzione dell'orientamento nell'ottica della valorizzazione delle differenze di genere ed etnico culturali

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#### ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the topic of guidance has assumed an essential strategic function at the international and national level (Council of Europe, 2018, 2022; MIUR, 2022), especially with a view to the reduction-elimination of school dropouts, the increase of employment in the world of work, the reduction of educational and economic poverty. In particular, schools are assigned a central role in preparing for the world of work (MIUR, 2022). This aim, however, must not obscure another essential training aspect of guidance, namely that of facilitating the individual in the construction of his or her own personal life project, which begins in childhood. All the initiatives aimed at building guidance pathways should therefore be directed not primarily at economic purposes, but at developing reflexive, metacognitive and critical skills that enable subjects to know how to face, with self-awareness, the contemporary challenge of uncertainty and precariousness. The contribution will focus on the function of guidance in conditions of social, economic and cultural inequality in order to guarantee everyone the possibility to realise their life project (Nussbaum, 2012). Gender difference is a variable that can preclude and/or make certain paths more difficult for girls and boys. A guidance pathway that is also attentive to this dimension, which is implemented in the long term and not only at "junction moments" (Gugliemi, D'Angelo, 2011), contributes to making gender difference a resource rather than a limitation.

Negli ultimi decenni, il tema dell'orientamento ha assunto una funzione strategica essenziale a livello internazionale e nazionale (Consiglio d'Europa, 2018, 2022; MIUR, 2022, 2023), soprattutto nell'ottica della riduzione-eliminazione della dispersione scolastica, dell'aumento dell'occupazione nel mondo del lavoro, della riduzione della povertà educativa ed economica. In particolare, alla scuola, viene assegnato un ruolo centrale per preparare al mondo del lavoro (MIUR, 2022). Tale finalità, non deve però occultare un altro aspetto formativo essenziale dell'orientamento, ossia quello di facilitare il soggetto nella costruzione del proprio progetto personale di vita e che ha inizio sin dall'infanzia. Tutte le iniziative mirate a costruire percorsi di orientamento dovrebbero essere quindi indirizzate non prioritariamente a fini economicistici, ma a sviluppare competenze riflessive, metacognitive e critiche che permettano ai soggetti di saper affrontare, con auto-consapevolezza, la sfida contemporanea dell'incertezza e della precarietà. Il contributo si soffermerà sulla funzione dell'orientamento in condizioni di disparità sociale, economica e culturale per garantire a tutti la possibilità di realizzare il proprio progetto di vita (Nussbaum, 2012). La differenza di genere è una variabile che può precludere e/o rendere più difficili alcuni percorsi per ragazze e per ragazzi. Un percorso orientante, attento anche a questa dimensione, che si realizza in un lungo periodo e non soltanto nei "momenti di snodo" (Gugliemi, D'Angelo, 2011), contribuisce a rendere la differenza di genere una risorsa anziché un limite.

**Keywords:** guidance | differences | educational segregation | life project | equal opportunities

**Parole chiave:** orientamento | differenze | segregazione formativa | progetto di vita | pari opportunità

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## 1. Guidance today through national and European legislation: meanings and perspectives

The topic of guidance has, in recent decades, often been the subject of interest of pedagogical and educational research, the subject is at the centre of national and international conferences, subject of work and updating for many teachers especially of secondary schools (Batini, 2012, 2017, 2023; Loiodice, 2004; Mannese, 2019; Riva, 2023; Vannini, 2023).

The concept of guidance has become a pervasive construct of many areas of pedagogical reflection to the point that it can be taken as a metaphor for educational action itself, the statement “to orient is to educate” (Martini, Ulivieri, 2015; Riva, 2020) implies a widespread transversal pedagogical commitment and concerns formal and nonformal contexts with the involvement of various educational figures.

Guidance has become an increasingly difficult essential need due to the incessant transformation of society that opens up uncertain and contradictory scenarios (Fiorentino, 2004). We are now immersed in a present in perpetual transformation, while the future appears increasingly uncertain and unpredictable. The centrality attributed today to guidance is certainly linked to the complexity and speed of digital transformations and innovations that characterize the social, economic reality, the world of work and training, so it seems clear that guidance is a process that takes place throughout the life span and not only related to pivotal moments or to prevent school dropout.

The literature about guidance (Soresi, Nota, 2020; Di Fabio 2010; Domenici, 2009) recognizes a turning point in the Concluding Recommendation of the Committee of Experts at the UNESCO Congress on Orientation in Bratislava in 1979: “Guidance means placing the individual in the condition of becoming self-aware, of progressing for the adjustment of his studies and profession to the changing needs of life with the dual objective of contributing to the progress of society and achieving the full development of the person.”

The current model of guidance is leaning more and more toward a humanistic-educational conception that seeks to interpret the person’s needs, inclinations and interests in order to channel them to educational settings and the labor market. Since the 1980s, the meaning of orientation understood as a training device, that is, not as a collateral and additional activity of the training pathway but as an essential function characterizing educational intervention, as a transversal working methodology, has been increasingly affirmed. Today in a special way thanks to the PNRR, the goals of Agenda 2030 and the issuance of the Guidance Guidelines (MIUR, 2022), guidance has had even more attention and resonance in schools, given that, mandatory hours are dedicated and funds are used. Behind the elements of apparent novelty reported in the Guidelines, some questions seem to challenge a model of orientation based on the principles of human development to affirm instead those of an unstable labour market tied to economic interests. As Margottini (2023) writes, if they stand in continuity with the previous 2014 Guidelines, which are also explicitly referred to, why start orientation interventions as a structured and coordinated system “from the recognition of students’ talents, aptitudes, inclinations and merit”? One of the basic issues that needs to be clarified is precisely the perception of the meaning of talent, aptitude, and inclination: can they be considered a priori characteristics or outcomes that result from a course of training? Clearly, this conception marks the way guidance activities are perceived and designed.

In Italy, already in the 2014 National Guidelines for Permanent Guidance (MIUR) a school guidance too often informative and carried out by external experts was criticized in the name of a formative guidance, carried out by curricular teachers. It should be carried out through an guidance didactics, carried out by adequately trained teachers that facilitates the acquisition of guidance, transversal, metacognitive and citizenship skills (Batini, Giusti, 2008; Batini, Guglielmini, 2024; Margottini, 2023), to enable subjects to be able to re-imagine and re-train themselves in different professional and life contexts.

Guidance implies opening up horizons of possibilities and worlds other than everyday experience, it implies imagining oneself differently, setting short- and long-term goals and finding the conditions to achieve them.

Another aspect to be clarified in the new Italian legislation is that relating to the tutor teacher and the teacher for guidance activities, figures assigned to the implementation of guidance teaching training paths in each discipline. It still remains to be defined what training is required for these figures and how concretely they will operate with colleagues and students, otherwise there is the risk of having only names as a reference for activities organized at times of transition from one school order to another.

Finally, the Guidelines also envisage the creation of a single digital Platform for Guidance, seen as an information tool to support choices through the mediating action of a teacher who will facilitate its use for families. The risk is of that function becoming a “mechanical” operation that directs important educational choices to the interests of the labour market. While it is good to keep in mind what the present and future trends in the world of work are and will be, it is also important never to lose sight of the individual’s subjectivities, interests and desires, and the transversal skills that allow each person to know themselves, to have the tools to understand and explore the complex social world.

Today there is no longer “the moment of choice” defined once and for all (Biagioli, 2023), rather there are a series of successive moments that recall previous moments, intertwine and influence each other, the dimension of guidance invests the entire span of existence, it therefore appears particularly necessary to acquire soft skills that can be used throughout life.

Guidance becomes a structural component of educational processes and is loaded with intrinsic meanings: self-knowledge, self-assessment, the ability to take on a dimension of intentionality and decision-making ability on one’s own. It becomes self-orientation if we understand it as deconditioning and capacity for choice, critical knowledge of the value system of socioeconomic reality, knowledge of the relationship between self and reality, self-knowledge based on information-training interventions (Biagioli, 2023, p. 98).

These words remind us of the importance of interdisciplinary and cross-curricular guidance, as well as the need for appropriate specific training of faculty and careful design of such activities within the educational offerings.

The positive novelty of recent legislation is the compulsory nature of such activities and the fact that funds are allocated for their actual implementation, at the same time some ways of implementation and verification of such activities remain to be clarified. For example, there is frequent reference to talents, merit but almost absent are references to the enhancement of differences (ethnic, gender, cultural...) so that they do not become inequalities.

Guidance in recent decades has also become a central theme of European educational policies, particularly analysed, and promoted in the European Council Recommendations.

The European Council states that member countries should promote the right to qualitatively high and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning, with the aim of ensuring opportunities for all to build key competencies, as set out in the European Reference Framework Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning (2018). Specifically, this involves “supporting and reinforcing the development of key competences for all, starting at a young age and throughout life, within the framework of national lifelong learning strategies; providing support for all learners, including those in disadvantaged circumstances or with special needs, to reach their full potential [...]”.

The European Union advocates the need for all Member States’ education systems to pursue, among others, certain priority goals such as reducing the percentage of early school leavers to less than 10%; decreasing the distance between school and socio-economic realities; eliminating the Neet phenomenon; and strengthening lifelong learning and training.

The recent Council Recommendation on «Pathways to School Success» adopted by EU Member States on 28 November 2022, outlines new intervention priorities for the pursuit of school success for all students, regardless of personal characteristics and family, cultural and socio-economic background, with strategic and integrated measures that include, among others, coordination with territorial services, continuous dialogue with students, parents, families, systematization of a balanced and coordinated set of prevention, intervention and compensation measures, and constant monitoring of interventions.

Therefore, there is a need to provide support “for educational staff and other stakeholders involved in learning processes, including families, to strengthen learners’ key competencies within the framework of the lifelong learning approach in educational, training, and learning contexts” by promoting collaboration, continuous horizontally and vertically, among educational, training, and learning contexts in the different dimensions and levels. In this perspective, inspired by a social vision that has as its cornerstone the principle of social rights for all, orientation becomes a right to training and retraining, comes to assume a central role, as a junction to be able to concretely realize those principles, which otherwise, without the implementation of targeted training paths risk remaining statements for their own sake.

As Costa (2023) writes, the guidance process can be represented as a narrative space constructed and defined from the conferring of personal meaning on memories, present experiences and future aspirations, combined in a life theme that shapes the individual's professional life. Inside this scenario, orientation training courses require non-standardized but personalized approaches, methodologies, and practices, with the slow pace of reflective (Schön, 1993) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003), which is achieved through devices that allow for the deep reattraction of themes and issues and the broad elaboration of them, according to a circular and recursive model of formative learning “in supportive and supportive educational contexts.”

Still referring to human development theory (Baldacci, 2019), to orient means to enable everyone to achieve the same goals starting from very different situations and trying to make up for initial deficiencies so that individual choices can be made consciously and not constrained by family and labour market economic needs.

## 2. The meaning of guidance between inequalities, equal opportunities and promotion of capabilities

Before thinking about which strategies and methodologies are most effective for guidance, it is necessary to reflect on what different worldviews and/or ideologies inspire guidance projects. In fact, various models may be behind them: from those more concerned with inclusion and the democratic nature of processes to support people's growth to those more aimed at Darwinistic selection criteria, which decides to bring forward those who are already good and endowed with skills (Riva, 2020).

The evolution of theoretical and methodological models of guidance and subsequent practices is closely linked to the development of human societies, influenced by economic, social, cultural transformations. It is precisely on the wave of this transformative trend that a new awareness of orientation has been gradually asserting itself, initially as an exclusively vocational need, then increasingly all-encompassing (Castelli, Venini, 2002; Di Fabio, 1998; Biagioli, 2003), to arrive today at a transversal dimension involving the subject's entire life span and taking place within a plurality of life, training and work contexts in a systemic perspective, becoming an integral part of the educational process and above all an action of existential accompaniment to the autonomous and responsible construction of one's life project (Riva, 2020). Since the second half of the 1990s, even in Italy, the formative paradigm (Batini, Guglielmini, 2024) has been established and appears particularly appropriate and useful today for all age groups.

The goal of formative guidance is to help people develop skills and competencies of self-guidance and to explore their abilities, interests, values and personal goals, so as to make informed choices regarding their educational and professional path (Batini, 2024, p. 38).

In the educational paradigm, guidance aims to support the person in self-knowledge and development and in the training of a set of skills that will lead him or her to autonomy in planning and management of self and choices, with an awareness of interdependence with others and of the various conditions of exercise and difficulties that may arise.

This guidance's function recalls the concept of combined capabilities, proposed by Martha Nussbaum, who states that such capabilities:

They are not simply inherent abilities, but also the freedoms or opportunities created by the combination of personal abilities and the political, social and economic environment. To make the complexity of abilities clear, I refer to these substantive freedoms as combined abilities. [...] Of course, a person's characteristics (personal traits, intellectual and emotional capacities, state of health and tonicity of the body, internalized teachings, perception and movement skills) are strongly relevant to his or her combined capabilities, but one must distinguish them from the combined capabilities themselves, of which they represent only a part (Nussbaum, 2012, p. 28).

One of the concepts that characterizes Martha Nussbaum's thought, namely that of capabilities, understood as real opportunities to do and act but needing the support of the surrounding environment in order to actually manifest themselves, expresses well the idea of how, each individual in order to be able

to realize his or her own project, needs a context, family, school, social, political, that allows them to transform their desires and potential, into concrete actions.

Guidance, following this approach, also means preparing a facilitating context, reducing the obstacles and inequalities that limit the individual's realization. It seems clear that this calls into question a series of tasks and responsibilities that are not the sole responsibility of the school, but also of the local and social community and families.

Doing guidance today does not mean making known the schools or universities that exist in the area, but facilitating the processes of achieving the transversal skills that allow each person to understand what to do, how to move to achieve certain goals, understand one's own potential and criticalities, be aware of the principles that guide us in our personal and professional choices. Underlying this should be an awareness of the risk that guidance may take the form of a chase for the continuous adaptation of people and his skills required by the technological apparatus (De Vita, 2022).

Guidance pathways should take into account not only technical and disciplinary skills but should especially support young people in improving their soft skills and develop greater awareness regarding these aspects, especially in the most vulnerable situations (Bembich, 2022). Boys and girls most at risk of failure often struggle to develop a positive self-image in the future in terms of desirable life paths, precisely because the failures they are repeatedly exposed to and negative school experiences certainly do not facilitate the development of a sense of efficacy and competence to positively guide their choices (Oyserman, Terry, Bybee, 2002).

Some authors speak of "choice guidance" (Lo Presti, 2010; Balzano, 2022), precisely to emphasize the importance of the subject's freedom in making a choice (Nussbaum, 2012). The choice is the result of a path of awareness that comes from afar, to which the family, the school, and the places designated to accompany growth contribute. Therefore, today more than ever, also in light of the effects that the pandemic and then the economic crisis have produced, it seems necessary to start again from people, authors and actors in educational and work contexts. The ability to choose, in fact, is one of the aspects undermined in the third millennium by influences of a neoliberal labour market oriented to the economic interest of a few individuals.

### 3. Guidance into e to differences

The concept of "difference" is often at the centre of philosophical, cultural and scientific debates in recent decades, particularly in the pedagogical-educational field it becomes a key concept to analyse and deconstruct common sense and to break down stereotypes and prejudices (Felini, Di Bari, 2019). The topic of difference education, intercultural education and gender education has been part of pedagogical research, initial and in-service training of teachers and other educational professionals for several years now. Consequently, even in the design of guidance interventions, we cannot fail to take into account the cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender differences that characterize society and too often risk becoming elements of discrimination and social inequality.

Italy is one of the European countries where the phenomenon of school dropout is most frequent. Young people between the ages of 18-24 with only a high school diploma in our country are 13.5% of the total, a figure surpassed only by Spain and Malta. A national average that hides a very wide gap in the spread of the phenomenon (Open Polis, 2020). If among pupils of Italian citizenship, it is 11.3% who drop out of school early, among those of foreign citizenship the share rises to 36.5%. The problem is not only Italian: in almost all EU countries dropouts are more frequent among foreign students: from an average dropout rate in Europe of 10.20%, 25.60% are foreigners, 8.90% are natives.

It is a matter of designing, at multiple levels, integrated policies and working, particularly in the experiential microsystems of female and at-risk students, so as to foster the development of effective study strategies to reduce the tension between aspirations and expectations with respect to educational outcomes and in the relationship between microsystems, so as to circulate and develop the social capital of those most at risk of failure (Sorzio, Bembich, 2023).

Guidance practices, therefore, must take into account the cultural scenarios within which the subjects' Self perspective is arranged, enhance different forms of knowledge, not only those codified in the school

curriculum, open spaces of possibility beyond the lived perception of the present and future of the everyday life context.

The other aspect related to differences, that of the intersection of guidance and gender is a relatively recent issue in both Europe and Italy, following the feminist movements of the 1970s. Until then, in fact, it was unquestioned, natural, when not decreed by law, that some professions were inaccessible to women and others were inaccessible to men.

Today, in Italy, no job is precluded for reasons related to gender: yet, still the language reflects the difficulty of defining in the feminine jobs historically carried out by men (think of the linguistic debate on the feminine equivalent of minister, mayor, councillor, as well as on the feminine of professions now carried out without a gender prevalence, such as architect, lawyer, doctor) (Bocci, Burgio, Di Stefano, 2024, p. 201).

The problem of educational segregation (Ulivieri, 1995; Biemmi Leonelli, 2016; Guerrini, 2017a), which then becomes occupational segregation, still persists today, whereby at the time of choosing high school and then at university boys and girls prefer the former technical and scientific studies the latter humanistic and nursing studies.

Numerous researches show the difficulties that girls face in pursuing scientific studies and professions, mainly related to social expectations, whereby these paths are not considered suitable for a girl, (Biemmi, 2019; Biemmi, Leonelli, 2022; Lopez, 2015; Cherubini Colella, Mangia, 2011), in addition to having then greater difficulties in the world of work.

Guidance, from an inclusive and sustainable perspective, must help people become aware of the strong inequalities, asymmetries and disparities on so many levels still present today and offer useful educational tools to combat them. Women continue to be underrepresented in STEM subjects and in mathematical, physical and natural sciences. In Italy women working in science and engineering are between 30 and 40 percent (Eurostat, 2021).

In Italy in 2020, women working in technical and scientific fields were 15.6% (Eige, 2021) A percentage 3 points lower than that of men in our country (18.3%) and both lower than the figure for both men (21.2%) and women (the highest share at 22.1%) in the entire EU. In other words, in a Europe where women on average work more than men in these sectors, Italy remains anchored to a gender gap that remains almost unchanged over time.

In 2019, more than 70% of engineering and science graduates in Italy were men, compared with only 30% women. A significant gap then, even though in Italy out of the total number of graduates from all disciplines, women constitute the majority (60% in 2020).

This trend cannot be traced solely to a matter of individual preference. Often the explanation is to be found in those stereotypes and prejudices that see girls and young women as “naturally” more inclined toward humanistic paths of study, as opposed to their male peers, who would instead be considered more inclined toward technical and scientific studies.

Research shows that in all European countries, parents are more likely to think that their sons, rather than their daughters, will work in a field of science, technology, engineering or mathematics-even with equal math achievement (OECD- Pisa Focus, 2015).

School guidance should enable everyone to realise his or her own life project, regardless of gender. This principle must be considered every day, at all stages of education, not only at the time of choice. This means encouraging boys and girls to experiment with all games and activities, e.g. not exclusively proposing dolls and home environments to girls in pre-school and technological and scientific toys to boys. We are immersed in a universe of stereotyped messages through colours, the roles of male and female characters, advertisements, mass and social media from which it is very difficult to free ourselves as everything now passes as normality.

Only specific training courses and moments of critical reflection on oneself, one's personal and professional identity can lead to an awareness of how much ‘implicit orientation’ and gender-stereotyping reaches everyone every day. Elena Gianini Belotti (1973) discovered this 50 years ago and warned families, educators, and teachers about it.

Teachers' and educators' training remains a decisive factor in this respect. Often teachers limit themselves to recommending a continuation towards a particular course of study based on what they consider

to be the specific characteristics of a pupil, without imagining that these may be the outcome of education, projections or the effect of conforming to what is expected of them.

As Batini and Guglielmini (2024) note, teachers' training is neither adequate to the topic of guidance and didactic guidance nor to the role of orientators who channel students towards paths that are already marked out according to gender. There is still little awareness among teachers of the action of stereotypes in educational practices, just as there is still little awareness of the strategic role played in orienting girls and boys right from primary school (Seveso, 2022).

The lack of male and female reference figures also has a significant impact on self-image and future choices: as long as textbooks and illustrated books (Biemmi, 2018; Guerrini, 2017b), advertising, and the whole culture in which we are immersed continue to present men and women in different and stereotyped fields of work, it will be much more likely that a boy will imagine himself as a scientist and a girl as an educator in childcare services.

Through a didactic orientation practised in the various disciplines, it is possible to critically analyse many aspects of the reality and culture transmitted at school, apparently as neutral but marked as masculine (Gamberi, Maio, Selmi, 2010). There are many female figures who have distinguished themselves in various disciplines but who are not known; history, for example, should accustom them to critically reading the causes of such exclusions. Teachers have the opportunity to make people understand how many stereotypical implicit social norms have passed for an accepted naturalness and inclination of genders towards specific fields.

The many initiatives that exist today to increase the number of women in STEM, including through scholarships and economic incentives, can only make sense if first there is work upstream of the teachers that begins in the kindergarten and proceeds every day. At the same time, through didactic guidance should also work on the masculine to propose multiple and different models of masculinity, so that one day no one will be surprised to see a man working as an educator in a kindergarten.

## Conclusion

The topic of guidance, even though for years it has been the focus of research by various disciplines, still needs to be developed by educational research, particularly in the training of truly expert professionals (teachers, educators, mediators, psychologists) on the subject.

The positive aspect, in Italy, is a specific attention at ministerial level and an economic investment on guidance, at the same time, the risk is that it remains an activity linked to the interests of the labour market. From a pedagogical point of view, it is necessary to continue supporting the value of guidance within the lifelong and lifewide training process that today, even more than in the past, sees people of all ages forced to re-think and re-form themselves. It is necessary to recognise in the guidance activities a real possibility for everyone, throughout their life, to experience a meaningful life, to choose a dignified job, beyond gender, ethnicity, social class stereotypes, especially on this last aspect, i.e. on the attention to differences there is still a long way to go, starting from the initial and continuous training of education professionals.

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