

# Students with Special Educational Needs at University: autobiographical narration and self-functioning in the inclusive perspective

## Studenti con Bisogni Educativi speciali all'Università: la narrazione autobiografica e il funzionamento del Sé in una prospettiva inclusiva

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The university period can be analyzed as the intersection point between adolescence and the adult: the young adult is called out to confront with their goals, motivations, values and interests that will orient future choices. The presence of a disability or Specific Learning Disorder can have an important influence on self construction, with consequences on its growth and adaptive results. A student in these situations can struggle with failure experiences that may occur within the social and educational context and develop an image in terms of inability and inadequacy, which can result in a lack of security, low self-esteem can drag along the whole life. According to the narrative approach which this research project is based on, self-narrative can be a key for developing and maintaining the sense of identity, allowing the person to give meaning to his own experiences of transition. The narrative rebuilding of the Self allows the subject to seek balance and better focus on his/her story, in equilibrium between agency aspects related to individual motivational factors and aspects of communion that relate to interpersonal motivational traits. Consistent with the preconditions the following research project aims to investigate the evolutionary needs of the population examined through a semi-structured interview that detects narrative identity, investigating the process of building self into the young adult by evaluating the students' profiles in terms of self-esteem, autonomy, self-awareness and resilience.

**Key-words:** identity, narrative approach, young adults, life project

abstract

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## 1. To be young adults: the challenge of identity

According to the literature the university period is the final stage of adolescence in which the young adult is involved in the process of building his/her own identity and his/her own plan for personal, social and professional life.

There is no unanimous agreement among researchers regarding the definition of the time of the adolescent age. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as: “the time of life between 10 and 19 years” [...], “youth between 15 and 24 years and young adults” [...], those between 10 and 24 years” (WHO, 1997); the American Psychological Association (2002) states that “...there is no set age range to define adolescence”. Some individuals begin adolescence before 10 years of age, while other aspects of adolescent development often continue beyond 19 years of age” (APA, 2002, p.1); the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2008) still uses the ages between 10 and 24 as an operative definition of adolescence, subdividing it into three stages: early adolescence from 10-13 years, mid-adolescence from 14 to 19 years and late adolescence from about 20 to 24 years of age.

Beyond age limits, the university period is a point of intersection between adolescence and adulthood, a turning point with respect to one’s own life and one’s choices (Cfr. Burt & Paysnick, 2012; Rutter, 1996; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Bruner, 1991), a sort of investment in changes (Grabber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996).

Every young adult is called to face himself/herself with new changing tasks and those goals, motivations, values and interests will guide future choices, as they seek coherence and continuity in their path of life (Confalonieri, 2009; Di Palma et al., 2013). This entails intra- and interpersonal psychological restructuring (Arnett, 1997; Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Aleni Sestito & Parrello, 2004), during which the youth passes from a condition of social marginalization, typical of childhood, to one, instead, of social recognition, thanks to acquiring specific status and carrying out the same roles that characterize adulthood (Scabini & lafrate, 2003).

Recent studies have shown that the moratorium phase of youth in Italy (Marcia, 1980; Cotè & Levine, 1987) is connected to different factors among which are extension of the educational stage, indecision and changing of one’s choices, (Ricolfi, 1984; Bazzanella, 2010), and the difficulty of leaving the family home. These factors can lead to an extension of the adolescent life span, causing delays in the process of transition towards adulthood and a possible impasse in the building up of Self (Aleni Sestito & Sica, 2010) with probable detrimental outcomes for the person (Birindelli, 2003).

Building a stable and coherent sense of Self is, according to the psycho-social perspective of Erik Erikson (1968), one of the main developmental tasks that the adolescent is called to confront. To speak of identity in this perspective means to refer to a sense of Self as cohesive and coherent in time that includes one’s own identity understood both as a sense of existence (what am I), as well as “who am I” (or rather, what makes me unique, the same and/or different from another), but also “who I will be” in a future perspective.

According to the narrative approach (Bruner, 1986, 1994; McAdams, 1996), Self-narration can be a means of developing and maintaining the sense of identity itself, allowing the person to attribute a meaning to his/her transition experi-

ences. In this perspective McAdams (2001) takes up the concept of “identity” proposed by Erikson (1959) and writes: “the Self is many things, but the identity is the life story; [...] the identity takes on the form of a story, with a setting, scene, characters, plots and themes” (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003, p.187).

According to McAdams (2006), the narrative identity is configured as a specific dimension of Self, which begins to form during late adolescence as a complex and integrated structure of social roles and/or representations of oneself, an internalized reconstruction of past history, current happenings and future perspectives. The narration of Self and of one’s own life history allows the person to find an equilibrium and a greater centering between the dimension of agency and of communion, between individual and interpersonal motivational aspects (Bakan, 1966).

The “Self” is considered a theoretical construct for which a multitude of definitions exist (Zahavi, 2003) of which it is difficult to find unambiguous definitions of the term. The Self refers to both the subjective understanding that the person has of himself/herself and of their own experiences as well as a multidimensionality of structural aspects of the same Self (Cfr. Shavelson et al., 1976, Harter, 1985; Marsh, 1990) such as: self concept or self perception (Cfr. Shavelson et al., 1976; Harter, 1985; Marsh, 1990), self esteem (Rosenberg, 1965; James, 1890), self efficacy (Bandura, 1986), esteem of their most specific competence.

Self concept can be defined as the perception that the person has of himself/herself (Shavelson et al., 1976), understood as the knowledge that the person has of himself/herself, the attitudes, evaluations and ideas about oneself and those that are formed during life. Ferrand and Tedard (2001) point out how some studies contrast self-consciousness, or to turning attention to oneself (self-consciousness), to self-awareness understood as the ability to be the subject of one’s own attention. In this context we will refer to the concept of self-consciousness as a tendency to turn attention to oneself or the ability in some situations to feel aware of oneself. In this perspective, the Self consists of two constructs: The Private Self, defined as that which the person feels, desires and experiences and the Public Self, or rather the general knowledge of how one appears to others (Carver & Scheier, 1985). Self-knowledge, like other aspects of Self, is a protective factor (Rutter, 1985, 1987) in the process of building identity. Garaigordobil, Dura and Perez (2005) propose a hierarchy between self-concept and self-esteem in which self-description is functional for positive self-assessment and this, in turn, plays a protective role for the person.

Beside this, self-esteem and resilience are fundamental dimensions in Self-building.

Self-esteem refers to the consideration and evaluation that a person has of himself/herself: the positive or negative attitudes of the individual towards himself/herself as a totality (Rosenberg et al., 1995, p. 141). This definition of self-esteem as a global and singular dimension was the main subject of research for a long time and only recently have studies on specific aspects and domains of self-esteem been reported in the literature. In fact, according to the multidimensional model of Self (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976), self-esteem is made up of different subdomains such as social, affective, physical, academic, familial, etc., of which global self-esteem represents the highest hierarchical level. Such specific areas seem to be more predictable than some specific behaviors with respect to global self-esteem, which, instead, seems more predictable than psy-

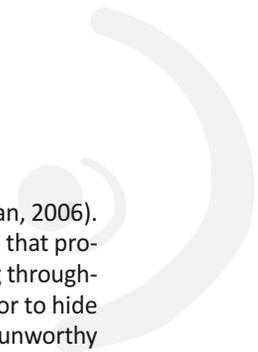
chological well being. For example, some studies (Wylie, 1979) show that there is more correlation between academic grades and academic self-concept than correlation with global self-esteem. Self-esteem is, furthermore, a very important factor for university students, where the academic context can be an opportunity to attain success and avoid failure, in order to protect, maintain and improve self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2003; Baumeister, 1998). However, if on one hand the pursuit of academic success strengthens self-esteem and is an important motivational factor (Steele, 1992, 1997), on the other, it can have negative effects on scholastic achievement and lead to academic problems. Further studies on self-esteem have shown important associations with other aspects of the person such as psychological well being (Sánchez & Barrón, 2003), influence of the environment and family educational style (Alonso & Román, 2005; Parra, Oliva, & Sánchez, 2004), learning strategies (Núñez, et al., 1998), and academic success (Fiz & Oyón, 1998; Mestre, García, Frías, & Llorca, 1992).

Resiliency is an important protective factor that allows the person to cope with the negative effects of stressful situations and fosters adaptation to the environment (Wagnild & Young, 1993; Beardslee, 1989; Bebbington et al., 1984; Byrne, et al., 1986; Masten & O'Connor, 1989). Being able to cope with critical and destabilizing situations by transforming them into opportunities for growth and development is a resource that can enable the person to reorganize his/her life positively. Resiliency is therefore considered an important protection factor with respect to psychopathological development; resilient people are described as people with self-esteem, self-efficiency, problem-solving ability, curiosity and satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Richmond & Beardslee, 1988; Caplan, 1990; Beardslee, 1989; Honzik, 1984).

## 2. The construction of Self in the case of disabilities and Specific Learning Disabilities

Dealing with one's identity means gaining a deep awareness of one's strengths as well as weaknesses. A disorder is not an exclusive and all-encompassing element of one's Self, nor is it an accessory component that can be overlooked or ignored. Difficulties, problems and/or disabilities are dynamically intertwined with health, activity and participation, and strongly define one's own identity and personal history. "The progressive settling of life experiences within us [...] builds who we are" (Demetrio, 1996, p. 112). In this journey of recognition and internal resonance, the time of diagnosis is crucial: it is the moment in which one's shadow area is objectified and named. One enters into the field of stereotypes and prejudices that stem from the tendency to calculate and rationalize attributes, expectations and possibilities.

A disability or a Specific Learning Disability can have an important influence in the building of Self, with consequences on development and its adaptive outcomes, as well as on the very construction of self-representation with consequences on the well being of the person. Various studies point out that repeated failure to deal with peers can lead to the development of a sense of uselessness and inadequacy. In addition, repeated experiences of unsuccessfulness and failure



can endanger one's Self-image and Self-esteem (Bandura et al., 1999; Ryan, 2006). The person can build a Self-representation of being unfit and inadequate that produces insecurity, low self-esteem and shame, which can be dragged along throughout his/her life. In these cases the Self is pushed to hide himself/herself or to hide certain parts of themselves because they are considered inadequate and unworthy or to renounce making certain choices, sometimes about study, or to show some aspects and not others (those of the disturbance) that have not been completely and harmoniously integrated into his/her identity. The problems associated with a disability and SLD can therefore weaken Self-structure (Cornoldi, 1999) with consequences on the affective, relational levels and the construction of his/her life plan (Cfr. Bryan, 2005; Fisher, Allen & Kose, 1996; Ryan, 2006; Huntington and Bender, 1993; Rourke, 2005; Winer & Tardif, 2004). Many studies have shown how learning disabilities can be a risk factor for future psychological difficulties (Alexander-Passe, 2006; Humphrey, 2002; Stone & La Greca, 1990; Mugnaini et al., 2008; Undheim, 2003). Low self-esteem seems to be the most characteristic element (often associated with depression) and one of the most significant risk factors for the development of problems of adaptation (Quatman & Watson, 2001; Alexander-Passe, 2006; Carroll & Iles, 2006; Prout et al., 1992). Persons with SLD have above all a low self-esteem in the area of scholastic competence (Terras et al., 2009). Furthermore, numerous studies have shown the relationship between a specific learning disability and low self-esteem, a sense of inadequacy, fear of failure and emotive-relational problems (Cornoldi, 1999; Most and Greenbank, 2000).

Young adults enter University with a perspective that is constantly changing according to the growth and changes in their life. The scholastic and academic experience is certainly central because it is life itself that is being measured. If, however, in the university years, students perceive a kind of pre-determination which they feel they cannot always influence, the academic experience increases room to maneuver and independence. Morin says that "life is a fabric that interweaves or alternates prose and poetry" (2015, p. 24) or restrictions and possibilities, reason and passion. Embarking upon one's life plan within the educational environment therefore means activating a constant dialectic between serenity and intensity (Viveret, 2006), weaknesses and strengths, limits and resources. The numerous studies on the life project, linked in most cases to situations with disabilities (Contardi, 2004; Cottini, 2016; Goussot, 2009; Ianes, 2006; Mura, 2014; Pavone, 2009) categorize this construct in multiple dimensions that include independence, professionalism, orientation, family involvement, social participation, and peer relationships.

Life project is a "double thought, in the sense of "imagination, fantasy, desire, aspiration, wanting ..." and at the same time in "preparing necessary actions, foreseeing the various stages, managing time, evaluating the pros and cons, and understanding the feasibility". That is, there is a "hot" project plan and a "cold" project plan (Ianes, 2009, p.44).

Accompanying a student with disabilities and/or SLD towards their personal life plan means first of all helping them recognize themselves in their own history, whatever it is, confronting difficulties and setbacks and potentiality and compensations. Recognizing oneself in an identity without taking for granted the identity that has been attributed to you is the first step in regaining one's own sense. Starting from this new and ongoing redefinition of Self, which changes slowly as life

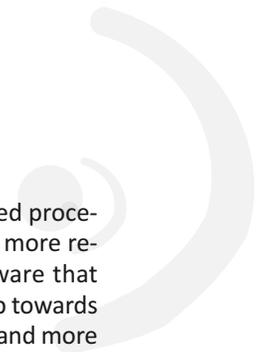
happenings become experiences and personal traits become elements of knowledge, it is possible for the person to activate conscious choices and to deal with their own personal project. There may be a considerable gap between the idea and the possibility, between what one wants to choose and be able to do and the reality of the facts. The path that leads every person to become aware of their own strengths and limitations is already a life experience. "The itself transformation does not proceed in a unidirectional way, it knows inversions, stops, shoots, turns: the path does not always proceed linearly, but with a spiral movement, apparently returns to its starting point, it seems to turn over, to advance in a new way" (Iori, 2006, pp. 147-148). To make mistakes, to change, to reposition is to become an adult, that is, to assume or take responsibility for choices. Taking care of the life plan of another is not only "repair the wounds, but also make the possibilities of being flourish" (Mortari, 2015, p. 123). Writing the chapters of your own existence therefore means opening up to all the dimensions of caring for yourself, and becoming an actor in your choices, freeing yourself from the past history and blocks experienced. It often becomes a second skin. Evaluating oneself within contexts that facilitate and others that hinder makes it possible to clearly understand that not everything depends on you: each project is given in defined times and spaces that can be dysfunctional, inadequate and inaccessible.

### **3. Alongside the student: Focus and In@b services of the University of Perugia**

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Active participation in university life is far from being assured a priori. A certain way of looking at this views participation in a limited sense, linked exclusively to the student's role and not the functions that derive from it. The University of Perugia chose to abandon the emergency mode, in part remedial, to allow the student with disabilities and/or SLD to take advantage of participating in the way that he/she proposes over time. A student with disabilities and/or SLD comes to the university with questions-needs: the desire to be taken seriously, to be accompanied to a deeper understanding of self and to assert his/her right to an education. Each student can then be viewed as a being which questions, which disrupts the ordinary and asks the university world to be more and go beyond, asking to be thought of as a competent adult with a plural identity. In this sense a young adult with special educational needs who begins an academic course is like a handyman who does not know what he will make, but gathers everything that he finds along the way seeing it as an opportunity for discovery and learning, continually refining his/her doing and being. Beyond the disability or difficulty that in part characterizes his/her identity, the student is a young adult who lives in the world, has an effect given certain limitations, but also has possibilities that derive precisely from his/her already determined being, as well as an "able to be" within certain conditions of departure. He/She has and is a life project.

The University of Perugia, having to activate a range of services to meet these needs, and this idea of student, found itself at a methodological and political crossroad: opt for a "technical" path that proceeds by categories and specializations or for a more "practical" one that favors starting from the experiences and



history to activate over and over again contextualized and individualized procedures. The University chose the second approach, considering it to be more respectful and inclusive for the enrolled students. The University is aware that taking care of the course of studies means not so much to provide a step towards adulthood, but rather finding ways to make the university time happier and more meaningful, during which the student is able to experience greater independence, freedom and self-determination. Accompanying a student in his/her personal life project means giving the student the opportunity to know his/her own frailties, master one's own "dependencies" and one's own aids, know how, when and why he/she needs help. The risk of "taking over" in relation to these students is always possible: while thinking about the student's future, about the possibility of leaving school and becoming an adult, but doing this in his/her place, perhaps pursuing a dream or an image that is only of those who are educating or teaching or those who are taking care of them. The student has to learn how to have expectations that are reasonable and achievable. In this sense, the University of Perugia has chosen to provide aids and mediators who can never be too competent to avoid the risks of dependency, victimization and claims for compensation (Canevaro, 2013) that evolve with the student, gradually becoming less invasive in order to allow the student to assume empowerment and self-organization. In terms of participation, the option chosen corresponds to the concept of a nest rather than that of a shell, that is, the University has chose to activate open, warm, proactive and nutritional services for all students and not just those with disabilities and/or with SLD.

Focus and Inlab services were founded to continuously offer ideas and provide activities that are intentionally left open-ended so that each student, disabled or not, can have input. The students can get practice in being independent, making small choices, while being "supported and accompanied", where information and support arouse questions, doubts, reorganization, and reformulations. This is a place where the participants try to simplify and take care of worries, without mistaking them as nonsense.

The Psychological Counseling Service is a place for listening to and supporting all students enrolled at the University of Perugia, helping them to deal with personal, relational and emotional problems, difficulties in exams, anxiety, and doubts about their personal abilities related to university studies that may emerge during the time of studies.

The purpose of the Service is to support the overall personal growth of the student by offering the psychological support needed to understand the problem at hand; to clarify difficulties; to activate internal psychological resources necessary to deal with difficulties and to support change.

The service is free, strictly confidential and is based on self-reporting by the student. It is structured to provide up to five sessions, free of charge (one entry meeting, one initial session and three sessions), lasting about one hour each plus a follow-up session six months after the end of the consultation. At the end of the meetings, ways of proceeding are evaluated. In cases where the consultation is considered to have clarified the reasons for requesting assistance, the consultation ends. Other situations may require further assistance (eg. psychotherapeutic or psychiatric help) that is evaluated with the student. Based on the first interview, the Service does not take on cases requiring emergency treatment or

where a specific setting is necessary (eg.: drug addiction, eating disorders with need for hospitalization, taken over by the family).

Pedagogical-Didactic Counseling is available to all students enrolled at the University of Perugia to provide support and help for those who are experiencing learning-related difficulties.

The aim of this service is to help students acquire and/or refine study methods, redefine their course of study, and understanding the specific needs in designing the life Project for students with disabilities and in identify special tools/aids for students with SLD.

The Inclusive Technology Laboratory InI@b is a study area available to all students at the University of Perugia. This area, equipped with information and communication technologies (ICT), was set up to respond to the needs of all students, particularly those students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD).

Each station has a computer, specific software (file management in pdf, map creation, word processor, etc.) and voice synthesis. Technologies for communication, learning and access to IT tools in the laboratory (hardware, software and web), can be used by the students for their study and personal research. Specific instruments available include Apple, Samsung and Microsoft Tablets, Pocket live-scribe Echo Pen and voice recorders.

Inlab technicians, in collaboration with the Pedagogical-Didactic Counseling personnel, are available to help students select the most useful tools for their study method.

Among the initiatives of the Laboratory we note:

1. The design of a USB Pendrive, containing free and open source software (opensource and free) for students with SLD; especially the suite of TuttiXuni programs (made by G. Serena).
2. The develop SLD Guidelines to Enhance Teachers, Researchers and Technical-Administrative and Librarian Personnel at the University of Perugia

The purpose of the laboratory is also to introduce, promote and experiment with study tools and technological aids for students with SLD.

## 4. The research design<sup>1</sup>

The University as a training institution can offer young adults an opportunity for growth by promoting the exploration of roles and ideals that enable them to engage in building their own present and future life project. "Education as expanding our horizons and prospects is a way to increase our ideals and lead us to new perspectives" (Schwehn & Bass, 2006, p. 25). This role is crucial for all students, including those with disabilities and SLD, who are not only facing architectural and/or social barriers, but also possible psycho-physical difficulties

1 The research group is currently made up by Claudia Mazzeschi, Laura Arcangeli, Moira Sannipoli, Chiara Pazzagli, Elisa Del Vecchio and Giulia Cenci.

that may be related to the difficulty of living fully and independently some life experiences such as that of university life.

Consistent with the theoretical premises described above, the aim of the following research project is to investigate the evolving needs of the given population and the self-building process in young adults, assessing the students' profiles in terms of self-esteem, autonomy, self-awareness and resilience, and directing the work of the FOCUS Service to empower the well being of students.

The research involves students of the University of Perugia with specific learning disabilities (n.88) and students with a degree of disability greater than 66% (n. 204) who self-reported at the time of enrollment.

In light of the complexity of the object of the study, the intra- and interpersonal dimension of self-building in the young adult, a multi-method approach (Waszak and Sines, 2003) was selected: a quantitative study through self-reports combined with a qualitative study through interviews. The "triangulation method" allows the subject of study to be understood in his/her uniqueness, entirety and complexity (Cicognani, 2002).

Following an invitation by mail and telephone contact, students can enter the FOCUS program. During the initial meeting, after reading and accepting the informed consent, a personal questionnaire is filled out, and the following questionnaires are completed: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSER) to evaluate self-esteem levels, the Anxiety and Resilience Questionnaire (QAR) to assess levels of anxiety and resilience, the Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS-R) to identify individual differences in self-awareness, the Identity Style Inventory-5 (ISI-5) to evaluate the identity style and the Questionnaire on Study Strategies (QSS). The questionnaire consists of a series of closed, semi-closed and open-ended questions to gather information about gender, age, geographical origin, and family status. The school career questionnaire consists of ad hoc questions to reconstruct the history of the learning disorder (typology, age of diagnosis) and the use of compensatory and dispensing tools in different learning environments.

In the subsequent sessions of approximately one hour each the Life Interview will be conducted (McAdams, 2001, 2012). The Life Interview is a semi-structured interview that reveals the narrative identity (or narrative self) or the "interiorized reconstruction of past history and anticipating the imagined future" of the person. After identifying the main highlights of the person's life, the interview develops around specific topics concerning the best and worst moments, turning points, past memories and future perspectives, important challenges for the person, values and ideals (religious and political) until a possible central theme of life emerges. The semi-structured form of the life interview encourages the person to speak freely and authentically, promoting a process of self-exploration and reflection about the deeper motivations that underlie their behavior, ideas and decisions (intrinsic motivation). The interview, granted to Professor Claudia Mazzeschi by the author, is audio-recorded and subsequently coded by Fole Center.

A six-month follow-up is planned: the initial self-report tools are returned and a satisfaction rating about the services received by participating in the research is compiled.

The project was launched in March 2017 and was enthusiastically welcomed by young students who responded well to the care and attention given to the personal life project of each.

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