

The education professional: From imaginary to knowledge. A laboratory experience

di Anna Grazia Lopez^o

Abstract

The Autor describe a training orientation experience intended for fourth and fifth year of secondary school students aimed at promoting conscious access to the university world and facilitating the process of building their own professional prefigurations. These paths led by career advisors, experts in the world of work and guidance representatives involved 16 classes from four institutes for a total of 278 students.

Each meeting was structured in two moments: a *Photolangage* workshop and a seminar, which consisted in making the experts in the field talk with the students of the schools participating in the guidance activity. The *Photolangage* workshop was followed by a moment dedicated to the meeting with experts from the world of training present in the territory, each of whom described their field of action. As it is written in the Guidelines, the guidance activity should also be done by those who have specific professional skills, who are outside the school and who can introduce the girls and boys to the world of work in order to promote the process of work inclusion. The experts in the area working in the field of education were asked to present to the students the professional profiles for the degree course: social educators, child educators and trainers.

The experts called to converse with the students each represented different areas of education and social work: one coordinator of an educational service for children, two company trainers, two social planners. Each of the eight meetings included, at the beginning of the activity, the administration of a semi-structured questionnaire aimed at surveying the students' previous knowledge about the educator's field of action, the skills of this professional profile, as well as future aspirations and expectations with respect to the guidance experience.

^o Università degli Studi di Foggia. Corresponding author: annagrazia.lopez@unifg.it.

Keywords: guidance, educator, life-long learning, professional profile, professional skills, system integrated.

First submission: 12/12/2020, *accepted:* 01/02/2021

Available online: 02/07/2021

Guidance and Tutoring Paths: a proposal

In recent years, the European Union has been committed to promoting integrated policies for employment and lifelong learning in order to respond to the economic and employment crisis that was going through it. The actions promoted, aimed at promoting «smart, sustainable and inclusive» growth (European Commission, 2010a), included the planning of interventions aimed at supporting the entry of young people into the vocational education and training system and higher education also in order to prevent economic poverty» (European Commission, 2010b, p. 3). The focus on lifelong learning has become even more important following the recession caused by the Coronavirus-19 pandemic. In fact, the document *European Skills Agenda for sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness, and resilience* of 30 June 2020 reaffirms the focus on job training and the paragraph *Skilling for a job. Aligning for policies to deliver results* (European Commission, 2020) underlines the importance of partnership with local stakeholders and the key role played by the University: «Higher education is an essential vehicle to provide students with the skills they need in the future. Universities generate the advanced knowledge and skills that help society innovate to address its big challenges. They are empowering people with high-level skills that allow them to boost their professional, social and personal development» (p. 11).

As stated in the *National Guidelines for Lifelong Learning* (2014), guidance as a training process functional to inclusion, overcoming social hardship (Zollo et al., 2016) and educational poverty (Federighi, 2018) assumes a strategic role especially because it involves a joint effort of all stakeholders – school, university, world of work – in order to create a «unitary and responsible integrated system of guidance centred on the person and his/her needs» (p. 3). On the other hand, we also know that «In order to implement a plan of paths and services that accompany the child/young person/adult in the different situations of life and in the development of their personal and professional project, it is necessary to define a system of analysis of the territory's socio-economic needs and the individuals' needs (real and/or perceived)» (Guidelines, 2014, p. 6).

The link of this system can only be the school, called upon to share guidance paths with other institutions in the area and to link learning to work contexts and the University for which the Ministry of Education and Research promotes participation in university guidance initiatives. Here we will focus on the “Pathways of Guidance and Tutoring” (POT) promoted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in order to accompany high school students in the implementation of their professional project and to make possible the connection between disciplinary knowledge, employment demand and cognitive actions oriented to the exercise of the future profession.

With respect to this perspective, the universities involved have been called upon to enhance the existing guidance and tutoring practices and to start training guidance courses for fourth and fifth year upper secondary school students in order to promote a conscious access to the university world and facilitate the process of building their own professional prefigurations.

These paths led by career advisors, experts from the world of work and guidance practitioners have involved: 16 classes (of which 6 school year 12 and 10 school year 13) of four Institutes for a total of 278 students (of which 238 female and 40 male), accompanied by their teachers.¹

Starting from what was foreseen in the framework of the POT project, the initiative organised for entry guidance had as its objective:

- to raise awareness of the professional profiles of the Study Course L-19, in accordance with the provisions of Law 205 of 27 December 2017, as well as the activities that characterize the professions and working practices of educators;
- to encourage motivated and aware access to L-19 Study Courses with respect to the knowledge and skills of the professional family of reference;
- to create close cooperation between school teachers and university professors for the exchange and validation of effective guidance practices.

Activities

Each meeting was structured in two moments: a *Photolangage* workshop and a seminar, which consisted in making the experts in the field talk with the students of the schools participating in the guidance activity.

¹ The data were processed by Valentina Mustone with a research grant funded by the POT-Percorsi Orientamento Tutorato (Pathways of Guidance and Tutoring) – University of Foggia.

The *Photolangage* workshop aimed to stimulate the group to share different thoughts, reflections, points of view, projects thanks to the mediation offered by photography. The use of photography as a teamwork method was aimed at allowing the same members to get to know each other, to socialize with each other and to give life to the group (Lo Piccolo, Alfano & Vacheret, 2020).

Each workshop was in turn divided into four phases: in the first one the participants were asked to observe and choose a photo – among those previously selected by the working group – that reflected their own idea about educational professions. Starting from this idea, which was socialized to the group, a discussion led by a University guidance counsellor, supported by the tutors appointed within the same POT project, was started.

As the *Photolangage* technique requires, the discussion started from a stimulating question: “*How do I see myself in the future?*”, which allowed students to talk about themselves, their thoughts, their plans. During the workshop activity the following key words emerged, thanks to which it was possible to identify common and recurring themes such as *help, support, peace-of-mind, peace, serenity, adults, happiness, stability, uncertainty, trust, parents, friendship, support, guidance*. From the forms filled in by the same students involved, it was possible to identify some recurring themes such as: family relationships, uncertainty about the academic and professional future, disorientation, the need to identify reference figures.

With regard to the first topic, during the discussion, difficult family situations emerged that were unknown to the class group but which made it clear how much the youth feel the need to tell what they are living and how they need a guide to help them talk about their lives, without fear and how they took the opportunity given by the *Photolangage* workshop to share even delicate situations. Many students with reference to the stimulating question, said they had no aspirations and desires regarding the near future. Others, on the other hand, although they had clearer ideas about what they wanted to do, could not identify the corresponding professional or training path, showing a strong sense of “disorientation” (some, for example, said they wanted to become teachers and for this reason they wanted to enrol in the Study Course in Education and Training Sciences, showing that they were not informed about the professional opportunities of the Study Course) which is also present in the entry questionnaires.

The analysis of the “key words” written by the students during the workshop also revealed the need to have reference figures able *both* to guide them in the choice of the path to take, after obtaining the diploma, *and* to help them face the future experienced as uncertain and in which they do not feel ready to enter. This need makes it clear how important is the

participation of all the stakeholders involved, each one starting from his/her own role, in the training of girls and boys (such as the family and the school with the tutor teachers), in supporting them in future choices.

The *Photolangage* workshop was followed by a moment dedicated to the meeting with experts from the world of training present in the territory, each of whom described their field of action. As it is written in the Guidelines, the guidance activity should also be done by those who have specific professional skills, who are outside the school and who can introduce the girls and boys to the world of work in order to promote the process of work inclusion. The experts in the area working in the field of education were asked to present to the students the professional profiles for the degree course: social educators, child educators and trainers.

The experts called to converse with the students each represented different areas of education and social work: one coordinator of an educational service for children, two company trainers, two social planners. The participation of privileged witnesses in the perspective of the 2014 Guidelines was also aimed at strengthening that “pact of co-responsibility” between the educational institutions and the subjects of the territory indispensable for the social and economic development of the territory and for the promotion of «the employability of young people and social inclusion» (Guidelines, 2014, p. 9).

The involvement of these professionals has allowed us to make known some of the institutions operating in the area by giving, through their testimony, a complete picture of the professional profiles examined and at the same time clarify curiosities and perplexities about them.

Administration of the semi-structured entry questionnaire

Each of the eight meetings included, at the beginning of the activity, the administration of a semi-structured questionnaire aimed at surveying the students’ previous knowledge about the educator’s field of action, the skills of this professional profile, as well as future aspirations and expectations with respect to the guidance experience.

In the common imagination, education is a process that concerns teachers and school. Understanding that there is an area, namely non-formal education, is necessary because it complements the education of women and men throughout life. In addition to this, until Law 205/2017, non-formal education was still little known and this also caused the lack of recognition of the professional profiles who were involved with it.

The attention to the training of educators and the need for their recognition is a consequence of the need to respond to an increasingly differentiated demand for training aimed at preventing educational poverty (*Save the children*, 2016; Istat, 2018) and to imagine and implement a system intervention that helps the weaker sections of the population to emerge from the condition of hardship and activate a process of *individual* and *community empowerment* (Lopez, 2007).

Data analysis was conducted on 278 entry questionnaires and 263 exit questionnaires².

The questionnaires were first examined as a whole and then divided into two groups: the first group includes 209 entry questionnaires and 194 exit questionnaires filled in by students from social-humanistic fields of study, such as Human Sciences – Economic Social Option, Health and Social care Worker; the second group includes 69 entry questionnaires and 69 exit questionnaires, filled in by students of classical, scientific and linguistic high schools. Finally, entry questionnaires were compared with exit questionnaires.

The purpose of the entry questionnaire was to collect information on the students' and students' knowledge of the activities that characterize the educator's working day, the skills needed to carry out this profession, the users with whom this professional works, the qualification needed to carry out the role of educator and the level of employability, in order to obtain a complete picture of the students' perception of this profession and how much it may determine their future educational or professional choice.

Question: *Do you know the professional profile of the educator?*

Out of 278 students, 52% said they knew enough, 15% much and 2% very much about the professional profile of the educator, while 25% said they knew little and 2% not at all. The remaining 4% gave no answer.

A comparison of the questionnaires was carried out starting from the study specialization which made it possible to show how the profile of the socio-pedagogical professional educator is better known by students in social-humanistic fields.

However, when asked about the qualification needed to practise as an educator, 13% think that a secondary school diploma is sufficient. By

² The entry and exit questionnaire has been prepared by the team of the Skills Assessment Laboratory of the Department of Humanistic Studies of the University of Foggia.

The lower number of exit questionnaires compared to the number of entry questionnaires is due to the early exits of some students, who therefore did not complete the course of the guidance activity.

disaggregating the data and distinguishing the answers given by students of high schools in the social-humanistic field from those given by students from classical, scientific and linguistic high schools, we discover that the percentage of misinformation is greater among students attending high schools in the social-humanistic field where 14% answer that a diploma is sufficient to be able to carry out the profession of educator. This leads us to understand that Law 205 of 2017, which states that access to the role of educator is subject to the possession of a degree in Education and Training Sciences (L-19) is not yet fully known, not even among those specialization fields where it should be.

Question: *In your opinion, with what kind of users and in what field can the educator work?*

In order to understand what information the students had about the educator, they were asked if they knew the type of users with whom the educator works and the areas of work. This was an open-ended question for which, given the different responses of the students relating to the most varied areas of the socio-educational and social sector of the users, three macro-areas were identified: *age* – minors, adults, elderly, each age group; *contexts* – family, prison, hospital; type of *intervention* – disability, drug addiction, immigration. According to some students, the educator can work in «rehabilitation centres», «associations», «social cooperatives», «in the field of social assistance»; some responded that they work with «teachers and lecturers», with «people who have to make a decision in the workplace». While most of the answers correspond to the reality of the contexts in which the educator works, there are others that show a certain confusion, therefore some respondents said that the educator can work in the studies of psychologists or at the «university in general», others as «school collaborators». Among the answers given, there are also *null answers* (38) and *I don't know* (2)³.

It is clear from the answers that there is still confusion and that there is a widespread opinion that the educator is mainly concerned with minors – as many as 228 students have indicated minors as the addressees of the educator's intervention – and this is true both for upper secondary school students belonging to the social-humanistic field, and those of the linguistic, classical and scientific high schools. Besides minors, the answers given concern the disabled, the elderly, foreigners and prisoners. Once

³ The sum of the answers is higher than the number of students because some of them indicated multiple users and work areas.

again the idea of the educator that emerges is that of a professional who performs a social-assistance function and who can therefore only work with a user who belongs to the weaker sections of society. Only 28 students answered that the educator can work with “every user” and 5 with “every age group” (Chart 1).

It is clear how important it is to establish forms of collaboration with schools in order to avoid the disinformation that ends up reinforcing students’ sense of disorientation.

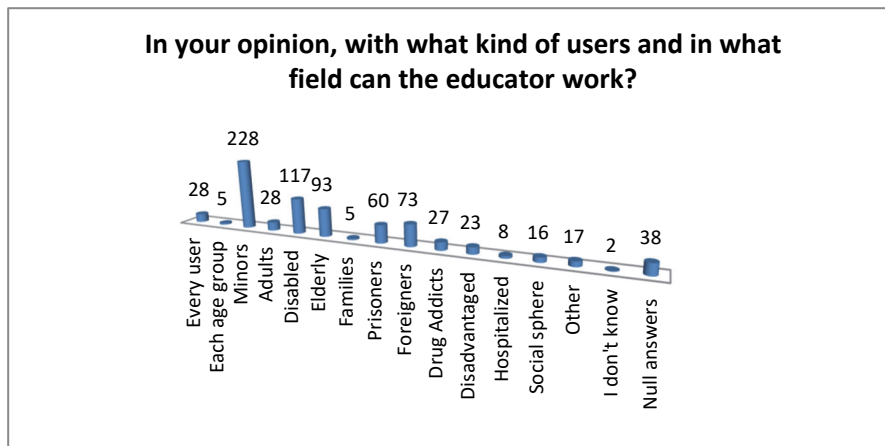


Chart 1 - Result emerged from the total number of entry questionnaires

Question: “Do you know the activities and actions that characterize an educator’s working day? If so, list them”.

The answers given by the students have reinforced what emerged from the previous questions, that is a certain confusion about the tasks that the educator carries out. Again, we have grouped the answers into macro-areas. In fact, there have been 216 responses that have not been able to outline the actions that characterize his/her working day. This confusion contrasts with what emerged in the initial question where 52% of the students stated that they knew the educator’s tasks quite well even though, in some cases, they were confused with the teacher’s tasks. In fact, some students indicated among the activities carried out by the educator the “didactic activities” (5) such as «instructing», «teaching and teaching activities», «working at school», «interacting with the pupils and managing their emotions». Among the activities listed under “laboratory activities” (39) of an educational nature there are: «organise various activities», «propose activities according to users», organise «relational, interaction and

socialization activities», «communication and creativity activities», «recreational activities», «training and educational activities», «sports and/or cultural activities», «workshops and reading». Only 9 responses identified “care activities” as «helping the weak», carry out «rehabilitation activities» and «care activities for the elderly, for children, for the disabled, for babies» as the main activity of the socio-pedagogical educator. These data are important because the skills that seem unknown are precisely those necessary for training the educator such as planning (Bonaiuti, Del Gobbo & Torlone, 2020) and observation (Rosati & De Santis, 2020). It is clear that in light of this information, we need to calibrate the guidance action but also imagine paths that put upper secondary school students in a position to “design”.

Question: “*Which of these skills do you believe it is essential to acquire in order to carry out the profession of educator?*”

In order to answer this question, a list of 18 skills that the socio-pedagogical professional educator should have⁴ has been provided: problem solving, planning, empathy, emotion management, creativity, team working, setting organization, relationship management, evaluation, flexibility, resilience, effective communication, reflectiveness, spirit of initiative, self-knowledge, decision making, conflict management, leadership. The skills indicated are various but if we extrapolate the answers given by the students in the linguistic, scientific and classical fields, we notice that they have privileged those soft skills more linked to the *relational* dimension such as empathy, team working, flexibility and effective communication, which is probably linked to the image of the educator as a professional profile with social-assistance functions, as on the other hand emerged in the answers given to the previous question (Chart 2).

Question: *What are the expectations regarding this experience?*

More specifically, the answers about expectations regarding this experience have been grouped in the following macro-areas: *guidance for the future* (98) (some students, for example, responded that they expect to «receive information to understand which study path or profession to choose in the future», «receive inspiration»); to *know the professional profile of the educator and the educational field in general* (57); to *know the Department* (18); to *acquire new knowledge* (34); to *know the world of*

⁴ In the chart the figures correspond to the number of times each skill has been indicated.

the university (13); *other* (14) (students want, for example, «to understand if a degree is needed», «to know the world of work»; moreover, they hope that this experience «is useful», that «it is not boring»; others instead have «high expectations» and only some do not have great expectations, probably because they aspire to «work in the nursing world»). Other students responded: *I don't know* (5), *no answers* (8), *null answers* (41).

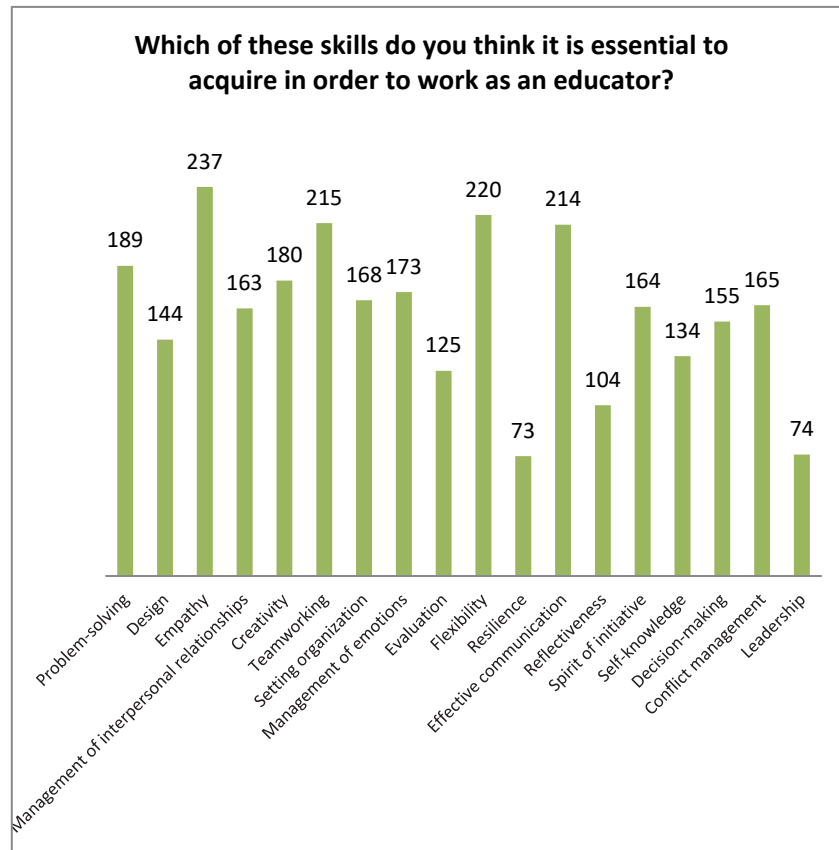


Chart 2 - Result emerged from the total number of entry questionnaires

Exit questionnaire

The results just described were compared with those that emerged from the exit questionnaires, after the *Photolangage* laboratory and the dialogue with the experts.

The purpose of the exit questionnaire was to evaluate the activity both

by comparing the data that emerged from the entry questionnaire and by asking for an opinion on the function of career advisors and privileged witnesses.

Question: *Do you think you know better the training, activities and skills (technical-professional and transversal) that characterize the educator?*

If in the entry questionnaire the answers were: *very much* 2%, *much* 15%, *enough* 52%, *little* 25%, *not at all* 2%; *null answers* 4%, after the meeting the percentage changed: *very much* 15%, *much* 52%, *enough* 32%, *little* 1%, *not at all* 0%, *null answers* 0%.

The change is very clear even if we compare the two different areas of study.

Disaggregating the data, we see that among the students in the social-humanistic field, 16% of the students who in the entry questionnaire claimed to know little about the profile of the educator has been reduced to 0%. The same happens for the students of classical, scientific and linguistic high schools who, if in the entry questionnaire answered 54% little, 30% enough, 3% much, 9% very much, 3% null answers, in the exit questionnaire answered 17% very much, 33% enough, 49% much.

Question: *What types of users can the educator work with?*

As for the users to whom the educator addresses, the idea that the educator cares for minors prevails in the opinion of the students, however, the responses regarding the other categories of users have increased, especially the responses of *each user* (from 28 to 50) and *each age group* (from 5 to 25).

Disaggregating the data, significant is the result recorded by the exit questionnaires of students of classical, scientific and linguistic high schools, among which the opinion that the educator can work with all types of users and all age groups increases. The responses of students in social-humanistic fields of study remain substantially unchanged.

Question: *Have Career Advisors and experts been able to involve and arouse interest?*

To this question, the total number of exit questionnaires showed that the students positively evaluated the contribution of career advisors and experts, who offered valuable information for the in-depth study of professional profiles. Specifically, 20% answered *very much*, 51%

answered *much*, 26% *enough*, while only 3% answered *little*. Even when disaggregating the data, the level of satisfaction does not change much. Students with a social-humanistic specialization answered 16% very much, 50% much, 30% enough, 4% little; while students from classical, scientific, linguistic high schools answered 15% very much, 52% much, 33% enough, 0% little and not at all.

The voice of experts

At the end of the experience, experts were also asked to give us their impressions and possibly make suggestions on the activity carried out, in order to understand if and which changes have to be made to the guidance path in order to improve its effectiveness and possibly rethink a redesign.

The suggestions made by the experts, in terms of activities to be proposed, were as follows:

- «if there are more experts, give the possibility to balance the exposure times and to make mini groups according to the profiles presented»;
- «administer a questionnaire to students in advance to better understand their level of information and motivation»;
- «select students for interest in the courses and propose workshop meetings»;
- organize «guided tours at professional facilities».

All the experts believe that the professional profile of the educator/trainer can concretely respond to specific professional needs in the territory, in particular in the following areas: «socio-educational»; «management and development of people in both public and private organisation»; «adult training in organisations»; «everyone's (children, elderly, disabled) training».

To the question to the experts: *In your opinion, how much the guidance activity was interesting in the students' eyes*, 25% responded much, 75% enough. In fact, according to some experts who took part in the seminar, even though the students were «interested and participating», the guidance proposal could be enriched with a «final debate» to make the experience even more effective, or «guided tours» could be organized because the students «need to know more about the educational field». Others have suggested involving only students who are interested in the world of education.

Finally, to the question “*Do you think this experience can help students to make more informed educational or professional choices?*”, 50% answered very much, 25% much and 25% enough.

Conclusions

The proposed intervention brought to light some critical issues linked to the scarce diffusion of information about the profile of the socio-pedagogical educator, the areas of intervention and the tasks that he/she has to carry out. This disinformation is evidently linked both to a scarce diffusion of information regarding career opportunities – even in high schools with a social-humanistic specialization – and to the complexity of this professional profile. Law 205 of 2017 states that the areas of intervention of the socio-pedagogical educator are the following: “educational and training; school; social welfare, limited to the socio-educational aspects; parenting and family; cultural; judicial; environmental; sports and motor skills; integration and international cooperation” (paragraph 594). The educator is asked, therefore, to operate on new fronts but above all to operate in complex and different contexts and to do so from a systemic point of view. These contexts require different professional skills and have to deal with a national and regional legislative apparatus that is not always coherent. Consider the educational services for children and the plurality of denominations they have assumed, the multiple educational opportunities they offer, their lack of homogeneity in the territory, the different organization of times and spaces, etc., elements that have made it difficult to understand what were the areas of action and functions of the socio-pedagogical educator (Palmieri, 2018).

Another aspect that emerged from the proposal put forward is the need to create a link with the institutions present in the territory, in order to allow students to know the areas of action of the educator and the skills both *transversal* and those more specifically required by the different contexts, but also to lay the foundations for that *mismatch* between demand and supply of work and retraining of skills through training systems and their connection with the world of work.

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