

EMPOWERING EMPLOYABILITY IN ITALIAN EDUCATION: LIFE DESIGNING APPROACHES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

R. Sgambelluri, F. Placanica

Università Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria (ITALY)

Abstract

The design of inclusive learning environments to promote the employability of students with disabilities is a necessity for today's Italian school, which is called upon to play a central role in socialisation and education. The school therefore has the task of implementing educational activities so that they support the individual planning and scheduling of each pupil's life projects. The transition from school to work, however, requires a proactive approach, with individualised support and the creation of realistic professional goals. Teachers and educators play a key role in this process; however, they must be adequately trained and use innovative teaching strategies that promote active learning and critical thinking of all learners. The Life Designing paradigm, introduced by Mark Savickas and Jean Guichard in 2005, represents a change in the approach to career guidance and construction. This model sees careers as continuous processes of personal and narrative construction. Today, in the Italian school context, this type of approach could be particularly useful in supporting students with disabilities in their educational and career paths, shifting the focus away from traditional career guidance towards a more holistic understanding of career development. More specifically, the Life Designing paradigm is based on Savickas' Career Construction and Guichard's Self-Construction concepts. Career Construction offers a framework for building careers through personal narratives, linking past events with future aspirations, while Self-Construction explores identity formation through the adaptation and reinterpretation of personal experiences. In the school context, Life Designing could revolutionise support for students with disabilities. Indeed, through specific programmes used by Career Construction and Self-Construction, schools could help these students construct personal narratives that strengthen self-esteem and promote greater self-determination. Narrative tools, such as autobiographical narratives, represent a crucial component in school orientation: they provide students with the opportunity to explore and reflect on their experiences and aspirations, structuring their educational and career paths in a more conscious way. In conclusion, the use of the Life Designing paradigm in education could offer a solid framework for improving the employability of students with disabilities. By promoting inclusive learning environments and implementing personalised educational pathways, all students will be able to achieve their professional aspirations. This approach could thus contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable Italian school.

Keywords: Inclusive Learning Environments, Life Designing Paradigm, Career Construction.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Italian school system, the inclusion of students with disabilities represents a crucial challenge; the school, in fact, is called to play a fundamental role in preparing students for a professional and social life that is autonomous and fulfilling. The transition from school to the workforce for students with disabilities requires a personalized approach, capable of going beyond traditional career guidance methods by supporting each individual along a path that fully considers their unique characteristics and specific needs. From this perspective, the adoption of innovative pedagogical strategies is essential to support the development of personal identity and contribute to the construction of life pathways aligned with students' abilities and aspirations [1]. In this context, the Life Designing paradigm, introduced by Mark Savickas and Jean Guichard [2], emerges as a particularly suitable theoretical and practical framework to support the personal and professional development of students with disabilities. The Italian education system, which has seen a progressive increase in the number of students with disabilities in recent years, could greatly benefit from the adoption of inclusive and personalized approaches such as Life Designing. This paradigm not only enhances individual experiences through the use of narrative techniques but also encourages self-determination, self-efficacy, and the construction of a solid and conscious professional identity. The goal is to guide students in recognizing and developing their strengths, enabling them to acquire greater self-awareness and realize their potential [3].

This article aims to explore the application of the Life Designing paradigm within the Italian school context, with particular attention to students with disabilities, analyzing the benefits of a career-building approach that values individual differences, promotes inclusive learning environments, and fosters self-awareness and, consequently, self-determination.

2 THE LIFE DESIGNING PARADIGM

The Life Designing paradigm, introduced by Mark Savickas and Jean Guichard [2], represents one of the most significant developments in the field of career guidance and life planning [4], addressing the complex needs of the 21st century. In a labor market increasingly characterized by flexibility and fluidity [5], where workers often face anxiety and uncertainty regarding their careers [6], Life Designing offers an innovative approach that transcends traditional career guidance and career counseling models [7]. This paradigm is based on the idea that a career should no longer be viewed as a linear and predetermined path but rather as a dynamic process of self-construction, in which work and life experiences intertwine, making the individual the principal actor in their professional narrative [8]. In Life Designing, career and life planning merge into a process of continuous co-construction; individuals use their experiences to build stories that provide meaning to their professional and personal journeys, thus responding to the need for a new conception of career that takes into account the uncertainties and complexities typical of contemporary society [4]. Savickas [9] highlights that Life Designing is a direct response to the challenges posed by liquid modernity [5], where workers can no longer rely on stable and predictable career paths but are called to continuously reinvent themselves and adapt to new work environments. To fully understand the evolution of the Life Designing paradigm, it is necessary to step back and analyze the development of career guidance theories over time. Historically, career guidance was founded on the matching theory introduced by Parsons [10], which proposed the alignment of individual abilities and interests with the requirements of a specific occupation. This perspective was later expanded by Holland's congruence theory [11], which emphasized the importance of compatibility between personality and work environment. While these theories remain useful in stable organizational contexts, they do not effectively address the needs of the contemporary labor market, characterized by constant structural changes and the absence of defined and predictable career paths [12]. With the advent of postmodernity, there has been a progressive shift in focus from organizations to the individual [13], leading to the emergence of new theories, such as Savickas' career construction theory [14]. In this new context, Life Designing emphasizes the active construction of one's career by the individual, who must attribute meaning to their experiences and integrate work transitions into a coherent narrative of their life [15]. Unlike the matching model, which relies on a static alignment between individual and job, Life Designing acknowledges the importance of flexibility and adaptability in a constantly evolving work world [15]. Life Designing has profound implications for the field of career counseling and career education, as it proposes a new approach to guiding individuals in constructing their professional path. Unlike traditional career guidance models, which focus primarily on occupational choice and linear career planning, Life Designing recognizes the importance of the relational and interpersonal dimensions in the career construction process [16]. In this context, the counselor does not merely provide information or guide the client in choosing a profession but plays an active role in co-constructing the client's life path, helping them reflect on their experiences and develop a coherent and meaningful narrative. One of the most powerful tools used in Life Designing is the Career Story Interview, which allows the counselor to explore with the client the life stories that have shaped their professional path and to identify recurring themes that can be used to plan the future. This narrative approach goes beyond simple career choice, encouraging deeper reflection on the motivations, aspirations, and values that guide the client in their career decisions [16]. The counselor thus becomes a facilitator of the process of self-construction and career development, helping the client to gain greater awareness of their resources and make more informed and conscious decisions. One of the most innovative aspects of Life Designing is the use of narrative as a central tool for career construction and professional identity [6]. In a world where careers are often fragmented and non-linear, narrative becomes the means by which individuals make sense of their experiences, integrating moments of change and transition into a coherent and meaningful story [16]. According to this theory, individuals build their professional paths by intertwining past experiences with future aspirations, creating continuity between who they were, who they are, and who they want to become. Narrative, therefore, is not only a tool for reflection but also a means for action; through recounting their experiences, individuals can gain greater awareness of the resources at their disposal, the challenges they have overcome, and the skills they have developed throughout life [17]. This process of narrative reflection consolidates professional identity and helps make more informed and future-oriented decisions [18]. As Savickas [19] noted, the Career Story Interview, one of the core techniques of Life Designing, enables the individual to explore recurring themes in their life,

helping them understand how these themes can be used to shape the next chapter of their career. Life Designing is not limited to job seeking [3] but integrates a deep pedagogical dimension, aimed at developing key competencies such as adaptability, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence. According to Savickas [20], adaptability refers to the ability to flexibly manage life transitions and challenges, leveraging personal resources to respond to new opportunities. This concept is closely linked to self-efficacy [9], which refers to confidence in one's ability to handle new and complex situations—a crucial aspect in an increasingly competitive job market. Self-efficacy enables individuals to act with determination in the face of difficulties and to successfully pursue their personal and professional goals. The pedagogy of Life Designing also promotes critical reflection and the development of resilience, essential tools to help individuals better understand their aspirations, identify resources, and plan effective strategies for the future [3]. A central aspect of this approach is emotional education [21], which not only contributes to individuals' psychological and physical well-being but also fosters social integration, helping people recognize, express, and manage their emotions constructively. This, in turn, facilitates the development of healthy interpersonal relationships, promoting a positive and supportive learning environment in which students can thrive. Furthermore, this approach encourages continuous and adaptive learning, pushing individuals to view challenges as opportunities for growth and to develop a mindset geared toward constant improvement. In this context, research has highlighted the importance of teachers' socio-emotional and relational skills, which are fundamental to creating an effective educational environment. For example, Primavesi [22] demonstrated how emotional and relational management is crucial for teachers' psychological and physical well-being, and consequently, for the success of the educational process. In conclusion, the Life Designing paradigm represents a flexible and innovative approach to addressing the challenges of the contemporary labor market. In a context marked by instability and uncertainty, this paradigm equips individuals with the tools necessary to manage life and work transitions with greater awareness and confidence, promoting a holistic and narrative vision of career and life. Through the use of narrative, career counseling, and personal reflection, Life Designing enables individuals to construct a professional and personal identity that aligns with their values and aspirations, while also offering a theoretical and practical framework capable of responding to the needs of an ever-evolving world [8][4].

3 SELF-NARRATION: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-narration represents a fundamental process in the construction of the self [23], as it allows the individual to structure their identity through the narration of life experiences. This process is not merely a means of communication but constitutes an act of reflection, enabling individuals to attribute meaning to their lived experiences and recognize continuity between the past, present, and future [24]. As Demetrio [25] highlights, self-narration provides a narrative structure that gives coherence to seemingly disconnected events, creating a personal biography that evolves over time. Through narration, individuals become the authors of their own lives, redefining their sense of identity in response to changes in their social and personal contexts [26].

Bruner [27] argues that self-narration is not just a communicative act but also a form of deep understanding of one's life experience. Each story told becomes a reinterpretation of the past, allowing new meanings to emerge, reconciling traumas and difficulties, and transforming one's life journey into a coherent narrative. This process of narrative reconstruction affects not only self-understanding but also how individuals relate to others and the external world.

Self-narration not only enables individuals to construct a coherent identity but also serves as a tool for promoting self-determination [28]. The ability to narrate one's story is closely tied to the capacity for making autonomous decisions and acting as a causal agent in one's life. As highlighted by Deci and Ryan [29], self-determination develops through the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The need for autonomy involves the ability to act independently, free from external constraints; the need for competence refers to the ability to effectively face challenges in one's environment; and finally, the need for relatedness pertains to the establishment of positive and secure relationships with others.

Self-narration fulfills these needs in various ways: through telling one's story, individuals gain greater awareness of their abilities and choices, developing a sense of competence that helps them navigate the world. Additionally, self-narration promotes autonomy by enabling reflection on decisions and action based on them. Lastly, the relational dimension of self-narration, which involves dialogue with others,

meets the need for connection, facilitating the creation of meaningful relationships based on shared experiences and values [30].

Self-determination is a key concept in personal and social development, referring to the individual's capacity to make autonomous decisions and act as a causal agent in shaping their destiny. According to Deci and Ryan's [29] self-determination theory, a person's psychological well-being is closely linked to the ability to meet three fundamental needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, as Wehmeyer and Schwartz [31] point out, self-determination is not merely an intrinsic capacity but requires a social context that fosters active participation and access to appropriate resources.

Self-determination involves the ability to set personal goals, make informed decisions, and act independently to achieve them. However, this process does not develop in isolation but requires support from an educational and social context that promotes autonomy and individual responsibility. As Hoffman and Field [32] emphasize, self-determination results from a combination of internal factors, such as self-knowledge and decision-making skills, and external variables, such as access to choices and support from the people surrounding the individual.

Self-determination cannot exist without a social context that supports and promotes it; in this sense, self-narration becomes an essential tool for fostering social inclusion [33], as it allows individuals to express their uniqueness and find a place within the community. Wehmeyer et al. [34] stress that self-determination is closely tied to quality of life, as a self-determined individual is able to influence decisions related to their well-being and actively participate in social life. Self-narration, by offering a space where individuals can share their experiences and engage with others, becomes a tool of empowerment, promoting active participation and inclusion [35].

In educational and social contexts, the use of self-narration can be particularly beneficial for fostering the personal growth and integration of individuals with disabilities or in vulnerable situations. Telling their story allows them to express their needs and aspirations while developing a sense of belonging to the community. This process of sharing and legitimizing personal experiences contributes to creating a more inclusive society, one that recognizes and values individual differences [36].

Self-narration and self-determination are deeply intertwined in the educational context, where both processes play a crucial role in students' personal growth. Through self-narration, students gain greater awareness of their abilities and aspirations, learning to make informed decisions and to act independently. In this context, self-determination becomes a primary educational goal, as it promotes the development of independence and self-regulation, essential competencies for both academic success and adult life [30].

The educational context, as recognized by the implementing Legislative Decree 66/2017 of the Italian Law 107/2015, emphasizes the importance of directly involving students, particularly those with disabilities, in the decision-making process regarding their life path. This approach aims to empower their self-determination by enabling them to actively and consciously participate in the construction of their educational project, thereby promoting individual and collective well-being.

The integration of self-narration and self-determination represents a particularly effective approach to promoting personal development and self-awareness. On one hand, narration allows individuals to give meaning and coherence to life experiences, transforming events and experiences into a story that enables them to better understand their journey. On the other hand, self-determination provides the opportunity to act autonomously and consciously, actively influencing the choices that shape one's path. These two processes are closely interconnected and mutually reinforce one another, generating an overall framework of personal growth and social participation that contributes not only to individual well-being but also to collective well-being.

4 EMPLOYABILITY IN THE INCLUSIVE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

In the last fifty years, Italy has embarked on a legislative and cultural path that has progressively embraced all students, regardless of their differences. This evolution, which transformed the concept of integration into that of inclusion, has made the Italian educational system an international point of reference, particularly for countries that still adopt a separate educational model [37]. The Italian Law 517/1977 marked a crucial moment in this process, introducing school integration and allowing students with disabilities to attend regular classes, supported by specialized teachers [33]. This approach was further strengthened by the Italian Law 104/1992, which enshrined the right to education for all students with disabilities, promoting individualized educational pathways tailored to their specific needs [38]. An

additional push for inclusion came with the 1994 Salamanca Statement, which had a significant impact on Italian educational policies, encouraging the country to reconsider inclusion in relation to so-called Special Educational Needs (SEN). This macro-category includes not only students with certified disabilities but also those with specific learning disorders and socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantages [39]. Since 2012, SEN have been formally recognized by the Italian school system, further expanding the concept of inclusion to accommodate students who, during their educational journey, may present special educational needs [1].

Despite the formalization of school inclusion by the Italian Legislative Decree 66/2017, which promotes the inclusion of all students, not just those with disabilities, significant challenges remain. These include overcoming the division between regular and specialized educational spaces, as well as reorganizing teaching methods and schedules to ensure the authentic participation of all students. As noted by Chiappetta Cajola [40], the adaptation of school curricula should genuinely respond to individual student needs, rather than merely simplifying content. In this sense, the challenge of inclusion goes beyond organizational aspects, requiring a cultural shift that values diversity as a resource for the entire school community [38].

In this context, the Italian decree known as the "Inclusion Decree" of 2024 represents another step forward in expanding inclusive measures. It introduces a new definition of disability and a multidimensional evaluation process, aiming to ensure a more accurate analysis of students' needs, offering an Inclusion Allowance to support people with disabilities in their daily lives (Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, 2024). This decree not only reinforces Italy's commitment to inclusion but also reiterates the principle that diversity should be considered an added value for the growth of the entire class group.

School inclusion is not merely an educational integration process but a key element in ensuring equal and fair access to education, which has direct implications for students' future opportunities. In this context, school inclusion and employability stand as two fundamental pillars in building a fair and just society. On one hand, school inclusion ensures that every student, regardless of their abilities or socio-economic background, has access to quality education and promotes equality of opportunity. On the other hand, it is closely linked to employability—the ability of individuals to successfully integrate into the workforce. In an increasingly globalized and competitive world, schools thus play a crucial role not only in providing academic skills but also in preparing young people to face the challenges of the labor market, equipping them with the necessary skills to actively contribute to social progress.

Recent educational and labor policies, such as the National Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance published by the MIUR (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research) in February 2014, introduced a new approach to school inclusion and career guidance, emphasizing the importance of lifelong education and training. This approach was further strengthened by the reforms in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), aimed at creating synergy between the education and labor systems to reduce school dropout rates and improve youth employability, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities.

School inclusion should not be considered a static or isolated concept but must be viewed as an integral part of a larger system involving not only schools but also families, communities, and the workforce [41]. As stated in MIUR's Guidelines (2014), school and career guidance is a continuous process that cannot be limited to specific moments, such as the transition from primary to secondary school or from secondary education to university. Instead, this process must accompany students throughout their educational journey, providing appropriate tools and resources to facilitate the transition into the workforce.

Schools, in collaboration with public and private entities, have the responsibility to promote guidance activities that go beyond teaching academic skills, including the development of practical and operational skills. As highlighted in the Lisbon Strategy (2010) and the subsequent Europe 2020 Strategy, these skills are essential for securing dignified employment and promoting social inclusion.

The principle of lifelong learning, enshrined in European policies, underscores the importance of continuous and flexible learning throughout life. In this sense, schools are not merely places where knowledge is transmitted but institutions that prepare young people to become active and conscious citizens, ready to face the challenges of an increasingly complex and evolving labor market. In this context, school inclusion is not limited to students with disabilities but also encompasses those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or who encounter difficulties along their educational path.

MIUR's 2014 Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance introduce a crucial concept: guidance is no longer seen exclusively as a phase of transition between school and work, but as a value that accompanies individuals throughout their lives. This new approach requires schools, in collaboration with families and communities, to play an active role in preparing young people for the future, not only in professional terms but also in terms of personal development. As highlighted by Guichard (2005) in his self-construction model, guidance should not be limited to career planning but should include broader reflection on self-construction and the multiple identities an individual can assume in different life contexts.

Career counseling, which has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, has become a central tool in helping young people design a fulfilling professional future. As emphasized by Savickas [8] in the career construction model, counseling should guide individuals in developing career management skills through a narrative and autobiographical approach. In this context, the narration of one's personal story becomes an essential means through which students can reflect on their aspirations and build a life project consistent with their interests and abilities, integrating personal and professional dimensions into a harmonious growth process.

MIUR's 2014 Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance highlight the importance of establishing a dedicated figure within each school, such as a tutor, whose role is to serve as a liaison between students, teachers, and the local guidance network. The tutor not only helps students make informed decisions about their educational path but also works actively with families and other social actors to ensure continuous and personalized support. The introduction of the tutor role is particularly relevant for students with disabilities, who often face challenges not only in accessing education but also in transitioning to the workforce. As noted by Wehmeyer et al. [31], self-determination is a key factor in promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities, as it enables them to act as causal agents in their lives, making informed decisions about their well-being and professional future. In this context, the tutor plays a crucial role in facilitating this process, providing support in planning the educational path and selecting job opportunities, thus contributing to a smoother and more inclusive transition. Therefore, schools are tasked not only with imparting knowledge but also with preparing students to become active and aware citizens, ready to enter the workforce. In this context, school inclusion and employability are closely intertwined, as both aim to promote individuals' autonomy and active participation in society. As noted by Friso and Caldin [42], it is essential that schools adopt a pedagogy of roles, offering students the opportunity to experience different activities and develop skills that will be crucial in their future employment. This pedagogical approach must be integrated with a continuous and personalized guidance system that accompanies students throughout their educational journey, taking into account their specific needs, particularly in the case of students with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds. School inclusion cannot be separated from labor market inclusion. As stated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the right to employment is a fundamental right that must be guaranteed to all, regardless of ability or personal circumstances. To achieve this goal, it is essential that the education and labor systems collaborate in synergy, offering concrete job placement opportunities and ensuring the necessary support to develop the skills required by the labor market. The recent reforms introduced by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aim to create a continuous training system that not only promotes employability but also reduces school dropout rates and fosters social inclusion. In this context, labor inclusion represents the natural continuation of the school inclusion process, as it enables individuals to actively contribute to society and realize their life project.

In conclusion, school inclusion and employability represent two sides of the same coin, both aimed at promoting individuals' autonomy and active participation in society, ensuring not only access to quality education but also to dignified employment [43]. The recent reforms introduced by the MIUR and the NRRP provide concrete tools to achieve these goals. However, it is essential that all actors involved—schools, families, communities, and the workforce—collaborate synergistically to build a truly inclusive and future-oriented system.

5 CONCLUSION

The Life Designing paradigm represents an innovative approach for addressing the complex educational challenges of the contemporary world, particularly in the context of inclusion and employability for students with disabilities. This model surpasses the traditional and linear view of careers, instead proposing a dynamic and fluid path in which life and work experiences intertwine to create a continuous and meaningful narrative of one's life project, both personal and professional. From this perspective,

self-construction becomes a central and conscious process, aimed at integrating past, present, and future into a coherent framework of individual growth.

The inclusion of students with disabilities today, more than ever, requires an educational approach that values individual differences and responds to each student's specific needs. Educational pathways must be personalized and aimed not only at developing technical skills but also at building a solid identity through the narration of one's experiences. Narrative tools, such as autobiographies and critical reflection on lived experiences, offer a powerful resource for strengthening students' self-esteem and enabling them to develop greater self-awareness; this, in turn, fosters self-determination and confidence in their abilities to face future challenges.

In this context, the integration of Life Designing into the Italian school system provides an effective response to these challenges. By promoting adaptability, self-efficacy, and resilience, it allows students to prepare themselves to navigate work transitions more consciously and proactively. However, for this model to truly impact educational pathways, it is essential that teachers and counselors receive adequate training. They must be able to use innovative narrative techniques and adopt inclusive pedagogical strategies that value diversity and offer individualized support to each student.

The Italian school system, supported by an advanced legislative framework in terms of inclusion, has made significant strides in ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, have the right to quality education. However, for school inclusion to translate into real access to the workforce, it is essential to develop effective collaboration between schools, families, public institutions, and the labor market. Only through a collective and synergistic effort will it be possible to provide students with disabilities concrete opportunities for employment integration.

Life Designing, with its holistic vision of career and life, provides the necessary tools to face the challenges of an increasingly uncertain and fragmented labor market. It enables students to build professional paths aligned with their values and aspirations, helping them develop the skills needed to adapt to constant changes. However, this approach is not limited to technical job preparation; it also promotes students' psychological and social well-being, fostering the construction of a professional identity that considers their human, relational, and emotional dimensions.

In conclusion, the adoption of the Life Designing paradigm in Italian schools could represent a significant turning point for improving the inclusion and employability of students with disabilities. Through the use of narrative and critical reflection, it is possible to build educational pathways that reflect not only the peculiarities but also the potential of each individual. The integration between school inclusion and career guidance, based on a personalized and narrative approach, promotes autonomy and active participation in society. In this way, it not only prepares students to enter the workforce but also helps them become conscious citizens capable of actively contributing to collective progress.

To achieve these objectives, it is essential that all parties involved—schools, families, the labor market, and public institutions—collaborate in a synergistic manner, ensuring continuous and targeted support throughout the students' lives. Recent educational and labor policies, such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), offer concrete tools for promoting inclusion and reducing school dropout rates. However, a constant and coordinated effort will be necessary for Life Designing to truly establish itself as a reference model for inclusive and future-oriented education. Only through an integrated and collective vision will it be possible to build an inclusive educational and labor system capable of responding to the challenges of an ever-evolving society.

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