

# DESIRES AS A GUIDE: INVESTIGATING THE OPINIONS OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS ON PATHWAYS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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## Abstract

The recent enactment of Legislative Decree No. 62 of 3 May 2024 offers new insights on the nature of guidance pathways for students with disabilities. The decree, indeed, makes explicit reference to the desires, expectations and preferences of the person with a disability, emphasising that these should serve as a compass in structuring an individual, personalised and participatory life project. This renewed interest could also spark a rethinking of guidance pathways from an inclusive perspective. Indeed, the design of such pathways could become a moment for expressing and enhancing the dimension of personal desire, with the aim of supporting the student with a disability in constructing their own life trajectory, one in which they are an active protagonist in their own choices, free from external influences and contextual constraints, with the goal of developing their agentive potential to improve the quality of life. In particular, for the purposes of this study, investigating the dimension of desire is of particular interest, as it is desire itself that defines the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the individual. For this reason, by recognising the generative power of desire itself, guidance cannot be reduced to a mere informational tool but must instead make room for the expression of the person's deepest dimension, their curiosity, their drive to know and transform the world.

This paper aims to present the initial results emerging from an exploratory survey conducted within the schools and training institutions of the Elis consortium in Rome, in collaboration with the National Centre for Guidance. The research, developed according to the Participatory Action Research methodology, involved administering a questionnaire to students and conducting interviews with the guidance counsellors involved in the organised guidance pathways. This contribution will present the results emerging from the thematic analysis of the data collected from the interviews, carried out with the support of MAXQDA software. The objective, therefore, is to investigate whether guidance counsellors believe that the desires of students, particularly those with disabilities, are taken into account and, therefore, contribute to the construction of the proposed guidance pathways.

Keywords: Guidance, inclusion, desire.

## 1 SHAPING THE LIFE PROJECT: THE ROLE OF DESIRE IN GUIDANCE PATHWAYS FROM AN INCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Transitions [1] between school levels and between school and the workplace often represent a difficult time for young people, especially for those with disabilities [2]. It frequently happens that, because of the complexity of this phase, the pathways designed for them reflect the apprehension and expectations of those around them and are therefore neither co-constructed nor centred on the person's needs [3] [4]. Awareness of this situation makes the enactment in Italy of Legislative Decree 62/2024 even more significant. This decree offers a renewed vision of the Life Project [5], that is described as an individual, personalized, and participatory project which, for the first time, must be based on the desires, expectations, and preferences of the person with disabilities [6]. Rereading the Life Project considering this definition underscores the need to give the individual an active role in preparing their own life trajectory [7] and to ensure that this trajectory is grounded in the deepest dimensions of the person, above all their desires.

*"It is desire, in fact, that guards the subject's difference [...] It is desire that digs a moat separating the subject – their 'absolute difference' – from the demand of the Other" [8].*

This shift in perspective, moving attention from outside to inside the person, may also prompt a rethinking of guidance pathways from an inclusive perspective. The design of such pathways could become a moment for expressing and valuing the dimension of personal desire, as a structuring element of the individual's uniqueness and specificity [9] [8].

Emphasizing this aspect could have an impact on the person's motivation, especially their motivation to work. According to Vroom's theory, the latter is the product of expectancy, valence, and instrumentality [10]. Thus, from this perspective, valuing personal contribution in defining a guidance pathway would influence the valence of the pathway itself, understood as the importance attached to achieving a goal, and would help strengthen the expectations of students with disabilities, that is a subjective assessment of the probability of achieving a given result following a certain investment of energy. In this sense, personal desire, supported by positive expectations and the emergence of agentive potential [11] [12], could translate into projectuality, which may help support students with disabilities in building their own life trajectory [13], making them active protagonists of their own choices [14], free from external influences and contextual constraints, identifying "what could give enthusiasm, strength, and direction to their own conduct" [15 p.3], in order to achieve "adequate levels of quality of life in terms of independence, social participation, and well-being" [5 p. 127].

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The research presented in this paper is part of a broader exploratory investigation aimed at understanding whether and how the dimension of students' personal desires is acknowledged and integrated into the design of guidance pathways actually offered in schools, with a particular focus on students with disabilities.

Specifically, this contribution focuses on the opinions regarding this theme that emerged from interviews conducted with two guidance teachers identified within the ELIS Consortium in Rome [16]. ELIS is a non-profit organization involved in training aimed at the employment of young people aged 9 to 19 and adults enrolled in employment centres; it collaborates with the "Officine Futuro" network in managing the National Guidance Centre. The two guidance teachers identified serve at the ELIS Vocational Education and Training Centre, which trains young people between 13 and 18 years old to facilitate their rapid entry into the workforce.

The investigation follows the methodology of Participatory Action Research [17] and is currently in the planning phase. This phase also included a moment dedicated to administering a questionnaire to students, aimed at investigating whether and how the involved students believe their desires are acknowledged and integrated into the construction of the guidance pathways proposed by the institute up to that point [18].

The investigative tool used was a semi-structured interview consisting of four questions.

The collected data were then subjected to thematic analysis [19], carried out with the support of MAXQDA software. The goal is to investigate whether the guidance teachers believe that students' desires, particularly those with disabilities, are acknowledged and therefore contribute to the construction of the proposed guidance pathways, or whether, on the contrary, they undergo adaptive modification based on available opportunities.

## **3 INSTRUMENT**

The investigative tool used was a semi-structured interview composed of four questions. The guidance teachers involved were interviewed individually, and the interviews were audio recorded.

Specifically, participants were asked:

- 1 Based on your experience, which aspects are most taken into consideration when constructing guidance pathways?
- 2 When designing guidance pathways, are the opinions of students regarding their desires and future expectations considered?
- 3 When designing guidance pathways, are the opinions of students with disabilities regarding their desires and future expectations considered?
- 4 Based on your experience, what factors can influence the opportunity to translate the desires of students with disabilities into achievable guidance proposals?

## **4 RESULTS**

The analysis of the interviews yielded the following results:

Regarding the first question, "Based on your experience, which aspects are most taken into consideration when constructing guidance pathways?", the first guidance teacher responded that in constructing guidance pathways at the institute where they work, they always start "from pleasure [...] whenever in these types of situations, we always start from the self, from the person." The other, however, stated: "in my opinion, little space is given to the person and more space is given to [...] having to adapt a bit to the world around us. So, since these are the opportunities, obviously the kids must be boxed into these opportunities."

Regarding the second question, the first interviewee responded that in constructing guidance pathways, the desires and expectations of the students are always taken into account, representing the starting point for structuring individualized interventions. The other guidance teacher, however, said "little [...] because the adult world does tend to impose itself a bit [...] unless we understand that the student actually has their own internal motivation, is determined [...] we take the students' desires into great consideration only with that premise I mentioned earlier, namely that we make sure that desire has such a strong motivation behind it that it pushes them toward its realization."

Shifting the focus to students with disabilities, both teachers involved maintain that disability does not represent a distinguishing criterion and that, therefore, the resources deployed for their peers are equally available to students with disabilities.

Finally, when we asked, "Based on your experience, what factors can influence the opportunity to translate the desires of students with disabilities into achievable guidance proposals?", the first interviewee stated that "The elements that could hinder that realization never come from the self. [...] they are always external elements." The colleague responded that what influences the actual feasibility of guidance pathways based on the student's desires is "how willing the student is to mobilize their own resources, but that is obviously not the only aspect because around the student there is a whole world [...] the student is a minor, so there is also the family interface; more than once it has happened, for example, that the student struggles precisely to get the family to support them, perhaps because the family is opposed, and therefore we also have to work on the families in this sense [...] So certainly the family is an element that can be either a driving element or an obstacle."

## 5 DISCUSSION

The analysis of the results emerging from the interviews provides interesting prompts for reflection.

Already from the first question, for example, a divergence of opinion between the two guidance teachers interviewed is noticeable: on the one hand, in fact, a vision of guidance as a pathway strongly centered on the person emerges, revealing particular attention to the individual's deepest dimensions, "to the self" as the interviewee defines it; on the other hand, a more disenchanting vision emerges, denouncing limited space for the individual's desires, which, instead, in some cases must be "boxed into" already existing opportunities.

This disagreement seems to persist also in the responses to the second question: the first guidance teacher, following the line of thought already expressed in the opening remarks, responds with conviction, stating that in the institute where they work, students' desires and expectations represent the supporting structure in the preparation of the guidance pathways offered.

The second interviewee, however, seems more cautious, believing that unfortunately too little space is given to the personal input of the students, unless they are driven by strong motivation. This reflection suggests the idea that it is the young person's task to assert their own will, otherwise crushed by the preponderant presence of the adult who, therefore, would seem to renounce the maieutic aspect of their role as mediator, failing to work to bring to light what the student desires and to co-construct the conditions so that this can be realized.

The opinions of the interviewees, instead, converge again in the responses to the third question. In this case, in fact, both participants agree that the presence of a disability does not represent a determining factor in the attention paid to a student's desires and expectations. In this regard, however, a reflection arises spontaneously: if, as stated in response to the previous question, the deepest dimensions of the individual manage to assert themselves only in the presence of strong motivation, what happens if the student is experiencing a moment of confusion and disorientation, as often happens in certain developmental stages [20] [21] and especially in the presence of a disability [2] [22]? This perplexity would seem to call, in our opinion, for the need to rethink the aforementioned mediating function of the teacher who, through guidance pathways, should work to gather the "hopes

of being" [23 p.45] of students, especially those with disabilities, and translate them into existential trajectories that allow them to fully express their potential and to self-determine [7], free from heteronomous conditioning.

Finally, the last question also finds agreement between the two guidance teachers, who identify the factors hindering the effective translation of an individual desire into a guidance pathway as predominantly factors external to the person. In particular, the second interviewee revisits the thesis stated earlier regarding the need for strong motivational drive from the student and then focuses on contextual aspects. Specifically, he identifies the family as a particularly limiting element. What emerged from this last question would seem to suggest the need to look at guidance pathways from an ecological [24] and systemic [25] perspective, since the individual is never detached from their surroundings, but rather is embedded in and influenced by all the contexts they live in, which, on the one hand, can represent facilitating elements and, on the other, can constitute barriers to their development.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

From what has been stated so far, two different conceptions of guidance emerge: on the one hand, a person-centred perspective is assumed, which places personal desire as the starting point for constructing the pathway to be delivered; on the other hand, a more adaptive approach is evident, in which guidance choices are conditioned by opportunities offered by the external context and seem to take little account of the deeper dimensions of the person.

This dichotomy would seem to suggest that the transition toward an authentically personalized and participatory guidance is not yet fully consolidated in operational practices.

Furthermore, despite their differing views regarding the role of desire, both guidance teachers implicitly recognize the need for mediation between the individual dimension and contextual constraints. In particular, the subject's desire is considered relevant to the extent that it is supported by solid motivation and is deemed translatable into a concretely achievable project, first and foremost by the family. This element highlights how, in practice, the recognition of self-determination is not absolute, but is often subordinated to contextual criteria.

This underscores that the guidance process cannot be considered exclusively in individual terms but requires systemic work that actively involves all the significant actors in the student's life context.

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