

People with disabilities in the university-work transition: a project to study networks

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Abstract

The employment of people with disabilities is a goal indicated by international and European development policies. The possibility of access to education and vocational training is a prerequisite for achieving an independent life. This paper presents a qualitative research design for studying networks, which can support education and vocational training pathways of students with disabilities. Networks play an important role in building relationships between students and other social actors, and they allow for the identification of resources to ensure equal access to education, vocational training, and labour market. The preliminary results of the legislation and scientific literature analysis indicate the relevance of two elements: a new concept of people with disabilities, considered not only as users but also as actors in the network; the contribution of educational research to human and professional development in non-formal educational contexts, such as work environments.

Keywords: *student with disabilities; internship; job placement; work-based learning; pedagogy of work; action research.*

1. Introduction

The paper is the result of the analysis carried out in the first year of the PhD in Educational Theory and Research, focused on studying networks that support students with disabilities in the transition from university to work. This constitutes the first step of a research project on the pedagogical potential of workplace experiences for university students with disabilities. This research design aims to explore how the structure and characteristics of the network of services, which revolve around the person, can contribute to improving the student's skills and increasing the chances of job placement in the future, starting from the university internship experience.

According to statistical sources and scientific literature, there is a positive correlation between the presence of an impairment (psycho-physical-sensory) and the difficulty in accessing the world of work, which results in a higher unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities

(Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT], 2019; ISTAT, 2022; Giovannone, 2022). Despite differences in the economic and social systems of countries, this situation persists throughout Europe (Galera & Tallarini, 2023; Nevala et al., 2015). The rate of students with disabilities obtaining a secondary school diploma and enrolling in a university course, instead, is on the rise (Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del sistema universitario e della ricerca [ANVUR], 2022). This trend could positively influence the chances of acquiring skills for the labour market, but it requires training paths for the human and professional development of students.

International and European legislation, in fact, promotes the protection of the rights of all citizens and provides guidelines for development policies. In the Agenda 2030 programme, for instance, education and work are two areas that aim to achieve the goals of education (Goal 4) and work (Goal 8) for all to ensure full participation in social and work life for everyone. Even though these goals and efforts are widely acknowledged as important, it remains challenging to translate rights into concrete opportunities for people with disabilities (Nagtegaal et al., 2023).

In Italy, the legislature's attention is underlined by Law No 17/99, which protects the right to study in higher education and introduces specific figures and services for students with special needs, and Law No 68/99, which supports job placement through targeted employment. Laws are essential tools, but they are not enough.

Promoting inclusion in education and access to work appears to necessitate cultural changes that are guided by pedagogical reflections and practices. According to the bio-psycho-social approach, pedagogical studies enhance a different perspective on the person with disabilities. Inclusion studies acknowledge that interactive interventions in real-life contexts offer opportunities to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices that hinder more equitable development processes for all (Cottini et al., 2016; Ciccanti, 2008; Friso, 2012; Curto & Marchisio, 2020; Montobbio & Lepri, 2000; Lascioli & Pasqualotto, 2021).

Theoretical research can develop an integrated study of training and work experiences, which can improve student engagement and foster an inclusive culture in work contexts (Dollinger et al., 2023). In current society, where the person-work relationship is changing, discussing diversity issues and practices could promote the well-being of all workers.

2. Networks and the pedagogy of work

The network, which is viewed as a system of relationships between actors who collaborate to support the life project of a person with special needs, is a crucial aspect of social policies (Franzoni & Anconelli, 2022; Mastropasqua, 2004). It is defined as a tool that can efficiently coordinate the services' interventions and manage economic and financial resources. Although the network has a significant role in organising activities, it frequently promotes welfare interventions designed to protect and safeguard people with disabilities. Some public and private

projects, organised in networks, also aim at human and professional growth (Borgonovi et al., 2016; Colleoni, 2018). However, they appear fragmented throughout the country, and therefore incapable of producing positive changes in the system.

In the research project, questions related to the job placement of students with disabilities in a network logic were analysed using the contributions offered by the pedagogy of work. This field of studies focuses on work and fosters constructive interactions with economic stakeholders. In light of these observations and using the network as an analysis unit, the pedagogy of work provides valuable insights for reflecting on university-work transitions and job placement.

2.1. The generative value of work

The importance of work in the lives of both individuals and society is underlined by the pedagogy of work in the first place. Theoretical studies highlight the generative nature of work (Alessandrini, 2017; Cegolon, 2020; Costa, 2016; d'Aniello, 2019; Dato & Cardone, 2018; Ricciardi, 2022): while working, an adult interacts with reality, comes into contact with it, and transforms it. Through education and work, individuals can construct their own identity and define it in accordance with the position that work allows them to attain in society. At the same time, the remuneration of work provides the person with the economic resources to plan and realise an independent life. People with disabilities may face various barriers that prevent them from accessing work and, consequently, opportunities for personal fulfilment. By critically examining the current debate on the transformations of work, pedagogy allows for the recovery of the centrality of the person-work relationship even in the presence of special needs (Canevaro et al., 2022; Marchisio & Curto, 2019).

In a network logic, understood as educational, it is possible to support the person by creating favourable environmental conditions for the self-promotion of the subject. In order to recover the meaning of generative value of work, the person with disabilities must be considered not just a user of the network but also as an actor in it. This change, which repositions the subject with respect to the network starting from the centrality of work, makes it possible to offer better protection of rights. To be embraced, it requires redesigning educational interventions for persons with disabilities and for other actors in various contexts (family, school, social health services, workplace, etc.).

2.2. Work-based learning

The issue of work-based learning (Albert & Marini, 2022; Bobba, 2016; Marcone, 2018; Vaccaro & D'Agostino, 2020) constitutes the other contribution offered by pedagogy of work for the purpose of the research design. European policies recognise work-based learning, which blends classroom and workplace learning, as a means of facilitating transitions from school to

work. In the case of a person with disabilities, it is important to consider how, when, and where to train for work, with the support of a lifelong learning network.

In education, in general, the encounter with work is a missed opportunity for young people with special needs. Even in the Pathways for Transversal Competences and Orientation of the secondary cycle (PCTO, in Italian schools) and in university internships, the priority of organisations is often only to protect students. Instead, to fully embrace an inclusive vocation and create socially responsible environments, higher education institutions should cooperate with workplaces to make them nodes in a network that supports the potential of students.

In a network logic, work-based learning, properly designed and linked to guidance interventions, enables students to place themselves in the work experience and reflect on aspirations, projects, learning, professional foreshadowing, and skills (Aluffi Pentini, 2023; Fabbri & Romano, 2019; Pellerey et al., 2020; Terraneo et al., 2021). At the same time, it allows employers to contribute to vocational training and design pathways to make future workers competitive in the market, while also identifying reasonable accommodations for accessible work contexts.

3. The research design for studying networks

The network is a tool used to organise services in the educational and social-health fields, as previously mentioned. The Guidelines on the targeted employment of persons with disabilities of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (D.M. No 43/2022) reiterated the importance of networks in active labour policies in Italy. This Decree provides indications for the development of interventions in favour of persons with special needs. It promotes ‘an integrated network with the social, health, educational and training services of the territory, ... for the guidance and support of the person with disabilities taken in charge in order to favour his or her job placement’ (p. 36).

In light of the importance of the network, the initial research question is: What structures and characteristics should the network have, in a specific territorial context, to support people with disabilities in the labour market? I decided to analyse the network from the perspective of internship and vocational guidance for university students with special needs.

The involvement of universities in the design of training curricula makes it possible to identify them as a key elements of the network. Educational research has the potential to help recognise resources and barriers in classrooms, training experiences, and future workplaces.

To encourage the active participation of social actors, the research design uses a qualitative approach. The project is therefore developed as an action research structured in two phases: I. Survey of current networks; II. Designing and monitoring university internship paths for students with disabilities.

3.1. A qualitative analysis of current networks

In the first phase of the proposed research project, a survey of existing networks in the city of Rome will be conducted. This choice makes it possible to localise the research activities while safeguarding the possibility of carrying out a sufficiently in-depth analysis due to the size and variety of the institutions and organisations present in the Roman territory.

A semi-structured interview will be used for data collection. The sample subjects, chosen for their representativeness in terms of the to the purposes of the research, are a) representatives of associations of people with disabilities, active in the protection of workers' rights; b) representatives of the working world, both public and private, involved in the promotion of people with disabilities and in active labour policies; c) graduates with disabilities, who are looking for a job or who work.

In the interview, topics such as the generative value of work and work-based learning for people with disabilities will be explored. The data collection will be useful in detecting current needs, resources, and barriers in school-work transitions and implementing good practices. It is assumed that the analysis of qualitative data can be used to enhance existing networks and to develop a hypothesis for a model of networked intervention in higher education.

3.2. University internship paths

In the second phase, the research involves the design and monitoring internship for university students with special needs. The analysis of workplace training pathways can help to build or redefine the student's social network for job placement.

This phase of the research can only be outlined and will be redefined on the results of the previous phase. The internship path will be co-designed with the student and the head of the host organisation, with a focus on the generative value of work and work-based learning. This activity will identify the network in which the student is placed, analysing the resources present and those to be found.

Taking into account the professional skills to be acquired in the degree course attended, the internship experience will enable students to reflect on their current educational and training needs and build/redefine their network according to the challenges of an adult life.

It will be possible to engage in exchanges between representatives of educational institutions and those of vocational training who, starting from the sharing of training experiences for students with disabilities, will be able to identify and disseminate new practices to improve social and work participation.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of legislation, scientific literature and some experiences, in university courses and workplaces (Giannoccolo & Aluffi Pentini, 2023), the preliminary results that emerged from the research design bring two elements to the attention of scholars: a) a new concept of the person with disabilities as active member of the network; b) the potential commitment of pedagogy to promote human and professional development in non-formal educational contexts, building networks in contiguous fields to support individuals and workplaces in the challenges related to new needs. These findings underline the feasibility of the next steps of this research project.

As concerns methodology, the focus on the individual leads to the preference for qualitative approaches, which emphasise the centrality of people in learning and training paths and in organisations.

Finally, for universities, the possibility of dialoguing with other stakeholders through pedagogical action research projects constitutes an opportunity yet to be exploited to contribute to quality improvement in all living environments.

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