

# TRANSFER OF NON-ACADEMIC SKILLS IN ACADEMIC CONTEXT: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY\*

Maria Luisa Iavarone (University of Naples Parthenope),  
Fausta Sabatano (University of Naples Parthenope)\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay is an element of dialogue between educational practices acquired in territorial education contexts and the University. In particular, starting from the 10-year long experience consolidated in three educational centres operating in border areas of the Province of Naples, a series of 'key competences' have been highlighted that are indispensable to the containment of social risk disadvantage in an inclusion (Bertolini 1977; Freire 2004; Rossi 2014; Sabatano 2015a, 2015b) and well-being project (Iavarone 2007, 2009) from an educational point of view. Such competencies have become subject of a 'participatory didactic planning' between expert educators working in these contexts and a university course on 'Pedagogy of relationships' within the Department of Motor Science and Well-Being at the University of Naples Parthenope. The participatory planning practice has set the most ambitious goal of achieving a 'system methodology' to be used in the curriculum-design of the university courses in order to make the academic education offer a proper link element between the educational demand of young people, the demand for professional skills in the territory and the emerging social needs in order to improve employability processes. The main results that this experience has highlighted can be deducted from the student's satisfaction survey, as well as from the data collected and processed by the University Assessment Team, in the Department's Joint Commission Reports, which show a clear and overall improvement of the communication processes between non-academic institutions collaborating with the University for the conduct of internships, training sessions and placement-targeted activities. The empirical evidence and the positive results obtained provide substantial comfort in considering that the experience gained can be a 'good practice' to be included in the didactic planning process of the courses, even in relation to the need to improve the educational and didactic offer with reference to the new quality assurance parameters (QA) for the periodic accreditation of the CdS according to the AVA-ANVUR legislation in force.

**KEYWORDS:** non-academic skills, employability, social educators

## 1. Participatory didactic planning for sustainable employment

Acquiring useful skills to improve employment is a crux in the contemporary socio-economic and productive debate which, how-

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\*\* Maria Luisa Iavarone, PhD, Full Professor of General and Social Pedagogy, University of Naples "Parthenope", Italy. Email: marialuisa.iavarone@uniparthenope.it; Fausta Sabatano, PhD, Post-doc Researcher in General and Social Pedagogy, Department of Physical Education, University of Naples "Parthenope", Italy. Email: fausta.sabatano@uniparthenope.it.

ever, should be primarily set in the context of education and training systems, first of all by means of a better focus on the curricula-design of the study courses, in order to make the educational offer a proper link between the demand of young people, the demand for skills coming from the labour market and the emerging socio-economic needs in the territory useful to improve the productive osmosis, condition which is indispensable for real employment.

The awareness that a more effective and efficient reform of the training and didactic systems is the best prerequisite for training professionals who are more suited to the needs of the labour market is an inevitable challenge and, moreover, extremely problematic, given the intrinsic complexity of the training-employment relation, as it involves not only the training systems *sensu stricto*, but also the territory, politics and local economy in its relationship system.

Consistent with this analysis, the project – to which this essay refers – intended to make a righteous *liaison* between the academic world and the labour market, by means of a ‘participatory didactic planning’ experience between a university course and a social educational enterprise that offers employment for educators qualified in inclusion processes of subjects with social risk. Specifically, the project, which took place at the University of Naples Parthenope, consisted in the experimentation of a teaching module called *Pedagogy of the relationship* of a Master’s Degree in *Motor Science for Prevention and Well-Being*, which was planned in a participatory manner between the Professor, the person who teaches the courses, and the Scientific Director of the Educational Centre.

The idea underlying the experimentation and shared among the partners of the project was to start from deconstructing the idea of ‘academic training’, traditionally understood as knowledge container, and to opt for a learning model based on the confrontation with ‘real professional environments’ through in-depth study of observation and reflection models in local contexts. Such analysis methodologies have been particularly used for studying contexts, related problems and needs of the ultimate recipients of educational work (minors at risk) in order to find strategies and interventions that are professionally appropriate and consistent with the local market demand and in tune with the academic curriculum chosen. This option has come forward to an education clearly understood not as a closed sector but as a personal and professional development environment meant for intercepting employability through a better understanding of the development processes of the territory and its communities, also in terms of social inclusion, health protection, prevention of educational risk for a better individual and collective well-being. Such orientation is, on the other hand, highly coherent with the national strategic objec-

tives and the European directives on *lifelong learning* and *higher education* related to the “descriptors of Dublin” EHEA (*European Higher Education Area*) and to expected learning according to EQF (*European Qualification Framework*).

In the second place, it turned out to be essential to pay close attention to the need to create connections between formal and informal learning: a lot of literature emphasizes the utility of implementing *crossover learning*, that is fertile connections between the quality of knowledge coming from different contexts, in order to enhance the incisiveness of the experience through non-traditional learning methods originating in the work places and in social and professional networks. For this purpose, participatory planning has included seminars integrated with the presence of privileged witnesses from working contexts to assess the way methodologies and instruments learned in the classroom can have a real meaning and utility in the professional context of destination.

The ultimate purpose of the project was to create significant learning environments and experiences on a pathway that is not always linear, and in which, however, the personal and self-conceptual dimension of each trained individual is enhanced in order to allow the possibility of experiencing himself/herself, creating knowledge.

Certainly, this way of rethinking education, especially in the academic context, puts methods, practices and even institutions in crisis because participatory planning indispensably places the theme of training for employability in the centre. This makes that a recent debate (Dunia 2017) refer to five key aspects:

- *empowerment* of the skills and young people;
- *engagement* of the territory and citizens;
- *endorsement* of politics;
- *enforcement* of regulations;
- *execution*.

With regard to the *empowerment of skills* for youth employability, it is necessary to refer to those which are useful and on which, therefore, the educational pathways should be focused. This field covers in particular strategic or meta-competence skills that each individual can use to redefine their knowledge according to the needs of the personal and professional context, with particular attention to the ability to consciously use social media and the network.

*Engagement of the territory* concerns the ability to cooperate with local institutions in redefining the curricula, with the aim of enhancing the experiences coming from below and contaminating the territorial fabric, affecting also the citizenship and social belonging areas to somehow influence the economical and productive fabric in the strict

sense. Starting from this perspective, local authorities could play a significant role in the outside world to support young people's start-ups, also in order to strengthen the local entrepreneurship.

*Endorsement of politics and enforcement of regulations* refers to the opportunity to promote educational paths that are created and re-absorbed by the labour market, designing the dialogue between the *lifelong* educational system and the work and professions system, also serving as a service to the society for better social, economic and cultural inclusion.

*Execution*, however, refers to the skill distribution process in the so-called 4.0 society, where the educational system must be aligned with the programming of social and economic-productive policies. Employability is also increased by means of innovative actions based, for example, on practice communities and on accompanying and vocational guidance systems, as well as by means of using active teaching methods – also in academic contexts – that facilitate the development of self-efficacy skills, such as resilience and the ability to work in a team.

## 2. *The educational plan*

In order to create pathways centred on the well-being and inclusion of subjects in conditions of social marginality, good will, passion, good feelings are not enough, even though they are essential elements that nurture intentionality and educational practice. It is absolutely necessary to structure an indispensable profile of skills in order to respond to the complexity and variety of educational needs. Therefore, implementing an inclusive perspective requires being able to meet competencies and needs. This is a fundamental issue that can be addressed only by reaching greater clarity over the professional profiles that accompany the life of a subject with ordinary or special needs (Canevaro)<sup>1</sup>.

This essay, as mentioned above, springs from the dialogue between educational experiences, gained within the territorial educational contexts, and the university. In particular, starting from the 10-year long experience acquired in three training centres operating in border areas of the city of Naples, a series of 'key competences' have been highlighted that are indispensable to the containment of

<sup>1</sup> A. Canevaro, *L'inclusione competente*, <[https://www.unipi.it/index.php/offerta/item/download/4032\\_fd34783ba39ce6b5bdf058a579d6dc3d](https://www.unipi.it/index.php/offerta/item/download/4032_fd34783ba39ce6b5bdf058a579d6dc3d)> (01/2018).

social risk disadvantage in an inclusion and well-being project, from an educational point of view.

The experiences referred to come from a project created about fifteen years ago<sup>2</sup>, currently implemented in three centres located in areas of high social risk of Naples (Rione Traiano, Licola mare and Quarto). These structures have an ongoing activity for children between 6 and 13 years old and their families. These are families with many problems, from the moment socio-cultural deprivation problems combine with life paths – in the best cases – at the limit of legality, but generally characterised by organised and non-organised local crimes. The project involves 15 educators and three supervisors (psychologists and psychotherapists) who have the task of supervising the educational relationship between the operator and the child.

A method has emerged from this research and training experience – the *Integra Method* – (Sabatano 2011, 2015a, 2015b) to counter social exclusion and stop the poverty, deviance and school drop-out phenomena currently studied by students from different universities and school teachers on the national territory.

### 3. *The skills of the social educator*

The educator is the person responsible for the delicate and difficult task of implementing the educational experience in the daily reality according to the guidelines and the theoretical perspective chosen, in an attempt to change the practice into improvisation and, thus, to non-scientific action (Bertolini 1988: 299-300). Therefore, educational professionalism is characterised by the «intention and ability to act educationally according to principles and guidelines belonging to the science of education».

Not everyone can be an educator. To generally state that this category includes any person who deals with education at a certain degree (parents, animators, teachers) is a widespread and dangerous misunderstanding. The educator is, in fact, the one who must have the knowledge and the useful general and specific know-how, on one hand, in order to be able to make conscious choices and to ori-

<sup>2</sup> The Integra Project, born in 2005 in the Phlegre area of the Campania region to support the difficult lives of children living in areas of high social risk in Campania, in its twelve years of activity involved about 700 children and adolescents. The Project is carried out as an extra-educational training offer at the Regina Pacis Educational Centre chosen by the Bishop of Pozzuoli to host the educational emergency and is entirely funded by the Diocese of Pozzuoli and the 8x1000 funds of Caritas Italiana. The local authorities have never had any contribution.

ent himself/herself towards the complex dynamics that influence the educational practice and, on the other hand, to work with methods, techniques and tools consistent with a sense that give the latter meaning. This means that even the most specialised skills that he/she may have and, in certain circumstances, must possess, have to pass the filter of a general pedagogical perspective in order to avoid the risk of a crush on action, of a reductionism in the technical sense. Only in this way, practice becomes a fundamental moment of conscious processuality. In this sense: «theoretical elaborations are supplemented with procedurality and visibility that, in order to be illuminated by thought, become conscious work. General and specific knowledge and skills, therefore, in the *theory-practice* circle, make the listening modulation possible not only to tune in with greater accuracy on known wavelengths, but also to give intuition and perception possible signals» (Gatto 2008). This being said, the idea arises that specialisation is an *inner dimension*, not an *outer* one, of educational professionalism. This means it is not a response to specific external conditions (age, disability, discomfort, deviance), but it rather refers to the *research dimension* of those tools that are not ready for use, but which have a critical and reflective nature that put the educator in a position to face reality as it comes to attention. It is possible to trace four types of tools (Erdas 1991: 156-157) that are essential in the work field in order to manage the complexity of the educational setting.

First of all, the *tools of paradigmatic nature*, i.e. the assumptions, paradigms, and beliefs that can be used as perspectives to start from in order to set general problems in relation to which an action program is to be developed.

Second, the *tools of explicative nature* (or epistemological), to be traced in all those conceptual schemes or hypothesis by means of which different sciences interpret and explain reality and which have an indisputable value in operational terms, translated as the need of programs capable of giving answers.

Third, the *informative tools*, i.e. those useful in identifying the context in which an educational intervention takes place, making it more effective as it is more responsive to the specific situation.

Lastly, the *technological tools*, understood as the set of models, methodological itineraries and, thus, techniques that can be followed in real situations and that guide the practices (e.g. Rogers' non-managerial model, Ausubel's meaningful learning, etc.).

Therefore, the task of the educator is to master these tools in order to know how to use them when the situation requires it, without rigidity, listening instead to the expressed and emerging needs.

However, it should be noted that the specificity of certain skills should never be considered closed, in exclusivity. As Canevaro (2013)

emphasized, the risk of a 'closed' skill that eliminates every other reality, privileging those seen through its own competence, neglecting interactions, relationships with other contexts and experiences. Clearly, it is instead necessary that the educational system – in the various contexts in which it is expressed – is based on the interaction between different educational figures. In fact, the complexity of the problems posed requires an indispensable integrated approach, in which the various skills can interact with each other to co-build the educational path. In the perspective of inclusion and well-being, being competent means, therefore, knowing how to communicate through dialogue and exchange, the skills to colleagues and colleagues who do not have the same profile of competence. This means that the ability to *make the context competent* is included in the competence profile.

At this point, it seems useful to dwell on the *proprium* of the social educator: What are the pedagogical skills that characterise this figure? What are the tools and techniques that the educator should master? Sector studies have offered over the years different and many classifications in terms of the skills of the educator in order to define his/her professional profile and to share at European level the criteria for the recognition of titles and skill levels required for the practice of the social educator profession<sup>3</sup>.

As previously stated, this consideration has the purpose to highlight the transferability of skills acquired in the field of educational curricula for the professions of well-being.

In particular, the work of observation of the skills of educators in action has allowed to identify those qualities that should characterise and inform the competent work of care professionals (Bertolini 1988: 308-311).

In the first place, *globality*, which derives from reading the educational event in the order and complexity of dimensions and variables that characterise it, pointing to the need for a competence that, as stressed above, does not deplete the understanding of reality in its own perspective, but is characterised by openness and, therefore, is able to interact with other professionals to interpret phenomena and identify possible intervention strategies.

Second, the *operativeness*, understood as the assumption of a conscious orientation towards the future and, therefore, towards the *possible*. This takes place in the actions on the field, in helping, stimulating, supporting, and encouraging the subjects in training on the

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, the document edited by the European Section of the International Association of Social Educators, *Common Platform for Social Educators in Europe*, January, 2005.

path that will lead them to be *more*<sup>4</sup> (Freire 2004) and to imagine an *otherwise* and an *elsewhere* (Rutter 1985).

Third, the *relationality* which descends from reading the educational event as something *to do with*, a *live together* that feeds on a communication skill, playing in person as the protagonist of the educational relationship. The stories of the subjects (educator and educated) intertwine and, thus, each relationship has its own story, which is the story of those people, a story marked by different stages that affect the quality of communication.

We are all in relationships and connected to others in different ways. *To be with* is a *proprium* of the human being, «man is a social animal», affirmed Aristotle, while Seneca argued that «people are not made to live alone», in order to emphasize how human life is marked in a social sense.

Getting into a relationship and improving one's own abilities is, therefore, a responsibility/opportunity for every individual, but especially for those who play an educational role. Relational skills are embedded in three dimensions: *knowing*, *knowing how to do*, *knowing how to be*. The first dimension refers to *knowing*, as the interweaving of three levels: *scientific*, related to the consolidated knowledge and scientific theories held; *implicit*, connected to beliefs, naive theories, prejudices shared within a culture and which implicitly shape our knowledge; *personal*, referring to the idea of the world produced by one's own experience, history, and perception of the self. The second dimension is related to *knowing how to do*, as the set of skills that outline the specialist skill of the educator. The third dimension is related to *knowing how to be* and, therefore, to the ability to listen, empathise and enteropathy (Bertolini, Caronia 2015: 92)<sup>5</sup>, to the awareness of knowing and feeling, of experimenting emotions (Gaspari 2002: 96).

Finally, the definition of the sense of competence of the social educator is the *integration between the individual and society*. The educator

<sup>4</sup> Freire sustains that a context that is satisfied with the existing one generates a shrinkage, a *being less*. Only a critical approach to reality causes the *righteous anger* and, therefore, a rebellion against the reality that immobilises and which, thus, betrays and denies the specific vocation of the human being: that of *being more*. Paradoxically, it is exactly this *incompleteness* – which man must become aware of – to give him greatness and protagonism in the dialectic of adaptation and integration, to oblige him to seek, improve, become an entrepreneur of culture, history, sociality and politics.

<sup>5</sup> Enteropathy is characterised by the ability of the listener – in this case, the educator – to decentralise and put himself/herself in the shoes of the subject educated. According to Bertolini, it is a relational style linked to *inclusive knowledge*, i.e. to the authentic understanding of the experiences and interpretations that support the actions of the subject educated. This type of relationality allows giving 'citizenship right' to subjective meanings that cause behaviours.

must necessarily look at his/her actions in the social direction, i.e. orienting the educational practices in order to increase the awareness of the youth about being a member of a community that shares rules and culture. This leads to a constant invitation to commitment and personal autonomy, so that children can progressively become self-conscious as members of a community. This process is particularly delicate in contexts of discomfort and social deviance, since belonging is not and inexistent feeling, as one might think, but rather well developed in terms of values, rituals, and behaviours proposed by the devious and illegal culture that individuals, families, the community, the children and adolescents absorb and make their own. As Bruner (1997) emphasizes, cultural belonging offers a *toolbox*, i.e. a set of beliefs, rules, values and visions of the world that outlines those cognitive patterns upon which knowledge and experience are based. In this perspective, it is fundamental for educators to recognise the dignity and legitimacy of the explanation models of the subjects educated (parents and children), who are confronted with knowledge, values and ideas proposed, varying the meaning and interpretation based on their experience. Therefore, the problem is not to equip the child or teenager with a new toolbox, but rather to understand what the toolbox used *contains*. It is about keeping in mind the *principle of perspective*, which concerns the subjective methods of giving a meaning:

the meaning of each fact, proposition or meeting is related to the perspective or reference framework based on which it is interpreted [...]. Logically, an official educational initiative will cultivate beliefs, skills and feelings in order to transmit and express the ways of interpretation of the social and natural world of the culture that delivers them. Therefore, it follows that an effective education is always in precarious balance, both in culture as a whole and in the groups representing it (Bruner 1997: 26).

Thus, the ability of the educator is expressed in educating the children to use the tools they possess, adding new ones based on the experience.

To these dimensions it is necessary to add the emotional skill, i.e. the ability to consciously manage emotions and feelings produced by the educational relationship. The socio-educational work is permeated by very intense emotional experiences, which are not always easy to decode and manage. Emotions are, at the same time, a *bond* and a *possibility*. In fact, on one hand, they often implicitly influence actions, by governing and guiding them, and on the other hand, if aware of them, they are a fundamental resource for dealing with situations, difficulties and relationships. Emotional intelligence (Goleman 1997), understood as the ability/possibility to know, identify,

evaluate, and manage one's emotions, then becomes central to the educational work, representing the basis for rational action, because emotions are driving the *thought*, and, thus, there is no thinking without feeling (Damasio 1995: 9). The development of emotional skills is, thus, a central element of educational professionalism, as the basic condition for being able to put in place an affective relationship between the educator and the educated person, on which the overall effectiveness of the action depends (Rossi 2014).

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