

Guidance pedagogists, narration and metacognitive teaching: strategies for preventing school dropout

Pedagogisti dell'orientamento, narrazione e metacognizione: strategie per la prevenzione della dispersione scolastica

Giuseppe Valentino^a

^a University of Naples "Federico II", giuseppe.valentino@unina.it

Abstract

Early school leaving remains a pressing issue in education, requiring formative, transformative interventions beyond mere corrective actions. This paper examines formative guidance as a pedagogical strategy to foster students' self-awareness, autonomy, and life planning skills, aiming to reduce dropout rates. It critically analyzes the introduction of tutors and guidance teachers in Italian schools under the PNRR, highlighting their role in supporting personalized learning and student empowerment. The study also explores narrative approaches for identity development, metacognitive practices for self-regulated learning, and the 2024 legal recognition of the pedagogist as a key school figure. It advocates for a shift from a functional, labor-market-driven model to a transformative educational paradigm focused on critical thinking, agency, and meaningful learning.

Keywords: school dropout; formative guidance; tutor teacher; narrative pedagogy; metacognition.

Sintesi

La dispersione scolastica continua a rappresentare una sfida per i sistemi educativi, richiedendo interventi formativi e trasformativi che vadano oltre le misure correttive. Questo contributo analizza l'orientamento formativo come strategia pedagogica per sviluppare consapevolezza di sé, autonomia e capacità di progettazione di vita negli studenti, con l'obiettivo di contrastare l'abbandono scolastico. Viene esaminata la recente introduzione della figura del tutor e del docente orientatore nella scuola italiana, prevista dal PNRR, in relazione ai percorsi personalizzati e all'empowerment degli studenti. Il lavoro approfondisce inoltre l'uso dell'approccio narrativo per la costruzione dell'identità, le pratiche metacognitive per l'apprendimento autoregolato e il riconoscimento giuridico della figura del pedagogista nel 2024. Si propone un cambio di paradigma: da un orientamento funzionale, legato al mercato del lavoro, a uno trasformativo, centrato sul pensiero critico, l'autodeterminazione e l'esperienza educativa significativa.

Parole chiave: dispersione scolastica; orientamento formativo; docente tutor; pedagogia narrativa; metacognizione.

1. Introduction

Early school leaving, referring to students dropping out before completing upper secondary education, remains a widespread challenge with serious consequences for both individuals and society. While the past few decades have seen steady progress in tackling the issue at a global level, with international cooperation helping reduce dropout rates, disparities persist. Between 2013 and 2023, for instance, the European Union saw its average early school leaving rate fall from 11.8% to 9.5%. Yet, these numbers mask inequalities not only between countries but also within them, as early leaving continues to be more prevalent in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. To confront this complex phenomenon, education policies must go beyond surface-level interventions and focus on systemic, long-term support for at-risk students. European frameworks like the Education and Training 2020 strategy, as well as EU Council recommendations on lifelong guidance, advocate for holistic and preventive approaches. At a broader level, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (specifically Target 4.1 of Agenda 2030) stress the universal right to complete equitable and quality secondary education.

In Italy, the reduction of early school leaving has taken on increasing importance in recent years. Historically, the country has faced dropout rates above the EU average, particularly among students aged 14 to 19. Responding to this challenge, the government has introduced a range of measures under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), aiming to reinforce personalized support and orientation services for students. Notably, the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM) introduced new Guidelines for Orientation in 2022, promoting a vision of education that is personalized and student-focused—intended to help learners develop self-awareness and plan their futures meaningfully. Reflecting this shift, Italian secondary schools have, since the 2022–23 academic year, included two new professional figures: the tutor teacher and the guidance teacher. These roles are designed to work alongside traditional educators, offering tailored mentorship to support both academic progress and life choices.

In parallel, legislative developments have given new formal recognition to the role of pedagogical professionals in schools. Law No. 55 of 15 April 2024¹ officially acknowledges the school and educational pedagogist as part of the educational system, with responsibilities spanning inclusion, orientation, and teaching innovation. This long-awaited move comes after years of debate and marks a significant institutional acknowledgment of the pedagogical dimensions of student support. Together, these reforms signal a potential shift in Italy's educational model—from a standardized, transmissive system to one more attuned to individual needs and aspirations, centred on orientation and personal development.

Against this backdrop, the article in question investigates innovative pedagogical methods for preventing early school leaving, focusing, in particular, on how formative guidance can be applied through narrative and metacognitive approaches. It puts forward an integrated theoretical framework rooted in orientation pedagogy, narrative learning, and metacognitive theory—arguing for a cohesive model of guidance as a core strategy in dropout prevention. The discussion is conceptual and critical in nature, grounded in a

¹ Legge 15 aprile 2024, n. 55. Riconoscimento della figura professionale del pedagogista scolastico e educativo e disposizioni per la sua integrazione nel sistema nazionale di istruzione. Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana www.gazzettaufficiale.it

thorough analysis of relevant literature, policy texts, and legislative materials, such as ministerial guidelines, PNRR initiatives, and legal statutes on school pedagogists. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the article aims to offer insights and generate hypotheses for practice and future inquiry. By comparing Italy's recent educational reforms with longstanding international practices—like school counselling models in other OECD nations—the analysis sheds light on both the strengths and the unresolved tensions in Italy's evolving guidance strategy. Special attention is given to how the new tutor and guidance teacher roles can incorporate narrative and metacognitive tools to more effectively engage vulnerable students and help them remain in school. The article concludes with a reflective examination of the challenges involved in turning policy into classroom practice and considers possible directions for research and pedagogical innovation in supporting at-risk learners.

2. Formative guidance and the role of the tutor/orientator teacher

Preventing school dropout effectively means reevaluating the core meaning and practice of guidance within education itself. Emerging pedagogical perspectives increasingly reject the notion of guidance as a one-time counselling session or a mechanical sorting of students into predefined tracks. Instead, they frame it as a continuous, formative, and liberating educational journey. Rooted in the principles of critical pedagogy, this view holds that orientation is not a neutral or technical task, but an ethical act—a commitment to nurturing each student's freedom and potential. It involves helping learners cultivate the capacity for self-determination amid the complexities and inequities of contemporary life. As argued by Freire (1974) and Mezirow (1991), education should be inherently dialogical and transformative, not merely a process of delivering knowledge—and this ethos applies equally to guidance.

In such a framework, authentic educational orientation hinges on active listening, acknowledging the student's perspective, and fostering environments where everyone can imagine and shape their own life trajectory, grounded in their unique aspirations, abilities, and socio-cultural context. It rests on an attitude of unconditional respect for the learner, regarded not as an object to be directed, but as a subject full of meaning and potential. Every act of guidance, then, carries with it a profound ethical responsibility: to resist the imposition of predetermined pathways or the reinforcement of social and occupational stereotypes, and instead to empower young people to explore a broad spectrum of life possibilities without bias. In practice, this means rejecting practices that merely channel students into "suitable" tracks based on grades or socio-economic status—patterns that risk entrenching inequality—and embracing approaches aimed at opening doors and enabling true emancipation (Nussbaum, 2011; Honneth, 2002).

Within this learner-centred and humanistic horizon, the idea of formative guidance takes shape. It moves beyond the narrow view of guidance as immediate decision-making about school or work, toward a deeper pedagogy of personal development (Mura 2005, 2018). Here, the student is no longer seen as a problem to be solved or placed, but as a young person actively constructing identity and meaning. Orientation thus assumes a political dimension in the highest sense of the term: it becomes a vehicle for building citizenship and fostering social engagement by expanding the student's awareness and capacity for action. The ethical imperative of guidance requires educators to do more than direct students according to current labor market trends; it calls on them to support students in posing the most essential questions—about who they are and who they seek to become.

Embracing this perspective calls for a fundamental reimagining of the teacher's role. The conventional "frontal" educator—focused primarily on transmitting content and assessing performance—must evolve into a mentor, a guide, a true *travel companion*, accompanying each student through their educational journey. Within a formative guidance framework, every teacher becomes, by nature, a guidance educator. Every subject taught, every activity undertaken, carries the potential to become a site for reflection—on oneself, on others, and on the wider world. This means that teachers are tasked with weaving guidance seamlessly into everyday teaching practice: by cultivating classroom environments grounded in trust, employing pedagogical strategies that stimulate introspection, and tending not only to cognitive development but also to students' emotional and motivational dimensions.

Such a shift also entails the development of specific interpersonal and counselling skills, particularly for those formally assigned as tutors or guidance teachers. These professionals must be equipped with active listening, empathic engagement, one-on-one mentoring techniques, and a foundational understanding of educational mediation and support. In this role, the tutor or orientator acts as a stable, relational anchor—ensuring no student is left unseen or defined by prior academic setbacks. Rather than dispensing prescriptive advice, they foster inclusive spaces where students feel acknowledged, safe, and empowered to voice doubts, ambitions, and challenges without fear of judgment. This relational component is not ancillary; it is fundamental. As Mortari (2006) underscores, only within such trusting contexts can students begin to articulate their inner questions—an essential first step toward reigniting their engagement with learning and envisioning a purposeful path forward. Ultimately, formative guidance permeates the entire school experience. Every subject, every learning moment, every interaction becomes an opportunity to connect academic content with personal meaning, encourage self-awareness, and reinforce a sense of direction in the student's educational trajectory.

In recent years, Italian education policy has sought to institutionalize this vision of guidance through concrete measures. The tutor and guidance teacher roles, introduced in upper secondary schools via the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) reforms (MIM, 2022), embody this mentor-oriented model. These professionals are allocated dedicated time and receive specialized training to support students in multiple domains: monitoring academic progress, refining study strategies, facilitating orientation pathways, and collaborating with families and external networks as needed (MIM, 2023b). The guiding principle behind these roles is personalization—by tailoring support to each student's needs, abilities, and aspirations, these educators can detect early signs of withdrawal and intervene before disengagement solidifies into dropout.

Crucially, these roles function not in isolation, but as part of a coordinated support system. Here, the newly institutionalized figure of the school pedagogist—formally recognized by Law 55/2024—may prove instrumental. Defined as a specialist in educational planning, guidance, and assessment across both formal and informal contexts, the pedagogist is positioned to serve as a catalyst for orientation and inclusion strategies within the school environment. By working in concert with teachers, the pedagogist contributes an epistemologically grounded and systemic understanding of learning and development—one that can inform and enhance school-wide approaches to student support (Mortari, 2007). The pedagogist's role, when integrated with those of the tutor and orientator, forms a synergistic professional team: while tutors and guidance teachers respond directly to students' everyday academic and personal needs, the pedagogist brings pedagogical depth, strategic coordination, and staff development to bear on the broader challenges of orientation and dropout prevention.

These reforms clearly signal a move toward cultivating a school culture where orientation is deeply embedded across all facets of education. The Italian Orientation Guidelines (MIM, 2022) explicitly call for guidance to permeate the curriculum, moving beyond isolated events like a one-off “orientation week” or sporadic counselling sessions. This cultural and structural shift translates, in practical terms, into several transformative measures: regularized mentoring meetings, the infusion of life and career skills within subject areas, the use of reflective tools like portfolios or digital dossiers—such as the “Student’s Masterpiece”—to trace personal and educational growth, and the development of interdisciplinary projects that allow students to actively explore their passions and potential. The broader vision is that of a personalized and democratic school environment, one committed to addressing not only the overt indicators of dispersion—like dropout rates, absenteeism, or grade repetition—but also the more insidious forms of qualitative dispersion, including the loss of meaning, emotional disengagement, and alienation from the learning process.

Indeed, when students physically remain in school but experience a deep disconnect—when they feel that what they’re learning holds no relevance to their lives—the likelihood of eventual dropout remains alarmingly high. Formative guidance seeks to counter this by anchoring education in personal significance and empowerment. It challenges the institution to reflect critically on its own cultural assumptions: Who is the intended subject of education? Who is welcomed and who is marginalized? What kind of human being—and what vision of the future—does the curriculum serve? These are not administrative questions but pedagogical ones, demanding that the school reimagine itself not as a place of sorting and compliance, but as a community of care, possibility, and liberation.

In this paradigm, guidance cannot be considered a neutral or technical process. It is inherently political: an active stance in favor of educational justice, radical inclusion, and the recognition of each student’s unique subjectivity (Mura, 2005). The newly introduced roles of tutor and pedagogue within Italian schools are not merely functional additions; they are conceived as “guardians of reflexivity and transformation”. Their purpose is to ensure that guidance remains rooted in its emancipatory promise and does not devolve into a checklist of procedural tasks. Through this model of formative guidance, sustained and enriched by these professional roles, schools gain a powerful means of addressing early school leaving—not only by preventing physical dropout but by restoring a sense of purpose, belonging, and direction in every learner’s educational experience.

3. Narrative and metacognitive strategies in formative guidance

While structural and policy reforms lay the groundwork for more effective student support, it is through pedagogical strategies that formative guidance truly takes shape in the day-to-day reality of classrooms. Among these, two interrelated approaches stand out for their capacity to re-engage students at risk of dropping out: narrative-based practices and metacognitive teaching. These strategies are not only compatible—they are deeply intertwined. Narrative approaches invite students to interpret their own experiences and craft personal meaning through storytelling, a process that naturally encourages reflection, a cornerstone of metacognitive thinking. In turn, metacognitive strategies foster students’ awareness of how they learn, often by prompting them to verbalize or narrate their learning journeys.

Together, narrative and metacognition offer powerful tools for helping students perceive

themselves not as passive participants in schooling, but as active agents shaping their own educational paths. This dual approach equips learners with the means to make sense of their struggles, recognize their progress, and reconnect with a sense of direction and purpose. What follows is an exploration of how each of these pedagogical strategies supports a formative orientation—and how, when implemented thoughtfully, they can serve as effective tools in the broader effort to prevent early school leaving.

3.1. Storytelling as an orienting tool

Within educational sciences, narration has gained recognition as a potent pedagogical approach, particularly within the realm of student guidance and counseling. Here, “narrative” extends far beyond merely telling stories or inserting anecdotes into lessons; it involves inviting students into the narrative of their own learning and life experience. The process of self-narration—articulating one’s challenges, experiences, and aspirations—holds significant educational potential. It supports the construction of meaning, helping learners make sense of where they’ve been, where they are, and where they might go. In today’s fast-paced and often disjointed world, many young people struggle to maintain coherence in their educational and personal journeys. Storytelling offers a powerful response to this fragmentation. It enables individuals to reorganize experiences, bring order to the seeming chaos of daily life, and shape a continuous, meaningful thread through their personal development.

Drawing on Jerome Bruner’s narrative constructivist theory, we understand that the human mind naturally processes experience through stories. In his view, we are shaped by the narratives we construct about ourselves—we quite literally “become” the stories we tell (Bruner, 1990; 2002). From this narrativist perspective, personal identity is not a static essence but rather an evolving self-narrative, always in formation. Orienting a student, then, is often about helping them to articulate their story: to interpret their present through the lens of their past, and to envision a future that is dynamic and full of possibility, not fixed or foreclosed. This understanding resonates with contemporary career guidance models such as the life design approach, which centers on the role of narrative reflection in shaping one’s future in an unpredictable world (Savickas et al., 2009; McAdams, 2001).

Theorists of autobiographical pedagogy have long emphasized that narrating oneself is a deeply educational act. Duccio Demetrio, a foundational figure in this field, argues that telling one’s story is a way to recognize and potentially transform oneself (Demetrio, 2000). The act of translating experience into language allows the learner to gain perspective, regulate emotions, and uncover deeper patterns or insights that may not have been consciously understood before. This reflective exercise becomes especially transformative for students who have encountered repeated failure or adversity—offering them an opportunity to reinterpret those episodes not as final judgments on their potential, but as integral to their growth process.

Extensive research in narrative pedagogy demonstrates that storytelling fosters the development of key transversal and metacognitive competencies: the ability to critically analyze one’s experiences, make reflective decisions, and consciously manage learning processes (Bruner, 2002; Formenti, 2008). In this way, narrative work inherently supports metacognitive development. Moreover, engaging in personal storytelling can reestablish a connection to school for students who feel alienated or discouraged. For an adolescent at risk of dropping out, being asked to narrate “the story of my schooling”—recounting their missteps, misunderstandings, triumphs, and failures—can be a pivotal moment of reconnection. Through this act of narration, students begin to externalize and interpret their

experiences, laying the groundwork for reframing their self-concept. What once felt like a closed chapter can be rewritten. As one student participating in a dropout-prevention program noted, “When I wrote about why I hated school, I began to see what I actually needed from school”. This act of re-narration enables young people to assign new, constructive meanings to past events and imagine a transformative shift—a plot twist—in their educational story.

In practical terms, educators have access to a wide range of narrative strategies that can serve as powerful tools for formative guidance. Among the most common is the learning journal or logbook, where students regularly reflect on what they’re learning and how they’re engaging with that learning—capturing not only cognitive processes but also emotional responses. Over time, these entries can surface meaningful patterns (such as recurring frustration in certain subjects) that open up productive dialogue between student and teacher. Another approach is the cognitive autobiography, in which learners trace the arc of their relationship with schooling from early memories to the present. This exercise often reveals pivotal turning points in their educational story, helping both student and teacher better understand the roots of their current attitudes toward learning (Tramma, Demetrio, 2007). Group-based autobiographical workshops take this one step further, creating shared spaces where students reflect on “turning points” and exchange stories. These collective practices don’t just build empathy and peer support, they allow individuals to see their narratives as part of a larger social fabric, reducing isolation and increasing mutual understanding.

Visual techniques, such as biographical mapping, also contribute to this work. Students create timeline-style diagrams of significant moments in their lives or learning trajectories, which are then discussed to identify personal growth, values, and sources of strength (Demetrio, 1996). Across these diverse activities, the focus is not on the aesthetic or formal coherence of the narrative; it is on what the storytelling process reveals. What unites all these methods is their capacity to prompt self-awareness and reflection, which are central to meaningful educational engagement.

In a narrative-oriented educational framework, the role of the teacher—particularly that of a tutor or guidance counselor—shifts fundamentally. Rather than correcting or evaluating, the educator becomes a facilitator of stories. Their task is to create a protected space for narration by establishing a culture of trust, confidentiality, and non-judgment. As Demetrio (1996) suggests, this involves “suspending judgment” and listening attentively, intervening only to ask open-ended questions that foster deeper reflection, such as “What did you learn about yourself from that moment?” or “How did that experience shape your feelings about school?”. In this setting, the teacher does not impose interpretations or redirect the student’s story but walks alongside them, helping to unfold its meaning. Guidance, in this sense, is not about providing answers to helping students formulate and explore the questions that matter to them. For students who feel voiceless in the school system, being truly heard can be a profoundly validating experience.

Many adolescents at risk of dropping out describe a sense of “heteronomy”—the feeling that school and life are things that happen to them, rather than with them or for them. Narrative practices aim to restore that lost sense of agency. The very act of telling one’s story becomes a reclaiming of authorship over one’s life. As Clandinin (2007) reminds us, every biography is “a story in the making,” and the role of education is to unblock and reopen narratives that have stalled or become mired in negativity. When schools adopt narrative-oriented practices, they often report a marked improvement in student engagement and relational climate. For example, storytelling workshops in Italian

secondary schools have helped cultivate empathy and dissolve entrenched oppositional dynamics between students and teachers—dynamics that often precede dropout (Demetrio, 1996). Similarly, structured narrative tutoring programs—where at-risk students meet regularly with trained educators or external facilitators to reflect on their academic and personal journeys—have been shown to rebuild confidence and a sense of belonging within the school community.

The challenge now is to ensure that narrative practices are no longer treated as peripheral or optional. They must be recognized as legitimate, essential components of educational practice. This involves more than just goodwill: it calls for strategic investment in teacher training to develop narrative facilitation skills, thoughtful integration of storytelling activities into the school timetable, and institutional acknowledgment that narrative work holds pedagogical value equal to that of more traditional academic exercises. When embraced in full, narrative practice becomes more than a technique, it becomes a *forma mentis*, a mindset through which educators approach their students and their craft. It redefines learning as a shared narrative, co-authored by student and teacher, and positions the school not as a credentialing machine but as a community of meaning. In this light, “constructing oneself through storytelling” becomes a pedagogical gesture of transformation—one capable of turning disengaged learners into reflective, active participants in their own educational journey, and thereby reducing the likelihood of school leaving.

3.2. Metacognitive teaching and reflective learning

Metacognitive strategies form the second key pillar of formative guidance, complementing the narrative approach by focusing on students’ engagement with the learning process. While narrative pedagogy invites existential reflection (“Who am I? Where am I going?”), metacognitive pedagogy addresses the essential questions: “How do I learn?” and “How can I manage my learning process?” Defined as the ability to monitor and regulate one’s cognitive activity (Flavell, 1979), metacognition is widely recognized as a core factor in academic success and a key condition for developing autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Cornoldi, 1997).

In the context of early school leaving, metacognitive teaching is especially relevant, as many at-risk students lack awareness of how they learn or why they struggle—often leading to disengagement. Explicitly teaching students to observe, evaluate, and adjust their learning strategies can foster a shift from passive reception to active participation, promoting a sense of ownership that sustains motivation.

As Formenti (2017) argues, a lesson is truly guidance-oriented only when it “activates processes of metacognitive reflection.” In this view, learning includes moments of critical examination of how one learns and how this connects to identity and personal development. The teacher becomes a facilitator of meaning—not just a transmitter of content, but a guide who fosters reflection, strategic thinking, and self-awareness.

This approach responds to the need to move away from transmissive, standardized teaching models still prevalent in many Italian classrooms. Guidance-oriented didactics is not limited to a specific subject; it is a holistic educational philosophy that integrates cognitive, emotional, and personal development. For example, a science teacher might prompt students not only to understand an experiment’s content but also to reflect on how they approached the task and what they learned about themselves in the process.

To foster metacognition, educators can use tools such as self-assessment checklists,

reflection journals, think-aloud protocols, concept maps, and real-world tasks followed by structured reflection. These activities support a transition to active knowledge construction. However, they require scaffolding: at first, teachers must model reflective practices explicitly—for instance, by verbalizing their thought processes (“I’m rereading the question to check my understanding”). Over time, students internalize these habits and apply them independently.

The link between metacognition and formative guidance is crucial for students with low confidence or motivation. Many do not lack ability but feel disconnected from learning. Metacognitive teaching helps them reinterpret difficulties as challenges to be managed. A student who believes, “I’m bad at math,” may, through reflective dialogue and strategy adjustment, shift toward “I can improve with the right methods”—re-authoring their learning identity.

This growth mindset is essential for persistence in education. Metacognitively skilled students are more resilient, viewing setbacks as part of the learning process (Cornoldi, 1997; Flavell, 1979). Italy’s recent reforms, aligned with the PNRR, emphasize this shift toward personalized, student-centred learning (MIM, 2022), promoting each learner’s “life project” as central to the educational mission.

Formative assessment is key in this transformation. Unlike summative assessment, it provides ongoing feedback, supports self-evaluation, and involves students in setting learning goals (Black, Wiliam, 1998; MIM, 2023a). When integrated into classroom practice, it fosters reflective learning environments where students actively shape their educational journeys.

Realizing this vision requires both structural and cultural change. Teachers must be supported through professional development and peer collaboration, moving from content delivery to learning design. Training in strategies like differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and inquiry-based teaching enables educators to support diverse learners while nurturing reflection and autonomy.

The introduction of new roles—tutor, guidance teacher, and pedagogist—offers valuable support. These professionals can facilitate interdisciplinary projects, lead training on formative feedback, and promote integration of guidance practices. Thanks to Law 55/2024, schools can now formally include pedagogists, encouraging collaboration between academic and developmental educators.

Ultimately, narrative and metacognitive pedagogies are two sides of the same coin. While narrative practices give meaning to learning, metacognitive strategies empower students to take control of it. Together, they promote engagement, self-awareness, and educational resilience. A truly guidance-oriented school fosters not only knowledge, but personal transformation—teaching not just *what to know*, but *who to become*.

4. Pedagogical perspectives and legislative innovations

In the profound wave of transformation currently reshaping the Italian school system, the interplay between regulatory reform and pedagogical vision is becoming ever more interdependent. The measures enacted in recent years—particularly those linked to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and the updated Orientation Guidelines—surpass the scope of mere administrative adjustments. Instead, they mark a deeper and more structural redefinition of the public school’s educational mandate. At the heart of this shift

lies the emergence of a new pedagogical paradigm, one that privileges inclusion, personalization, formative orientation, and a renewed and deliberate focus on the holistic care of the learner as a unique and complex individual.

Among the most significant and impactful developments within this evolving landscape is, without a doubt, the long-anticipated legal recognition of the pedagogical profession, formally established through the enactment of Law 55 on 15 May 2024. This important legislative step acknowledges the pedagogist as a fully-fledged educational professional, possessing specialized expertise in the design, management, and evaluation of interventions across formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. Within schools, the pedagogist assumes a vital and multidimensional role: fostering effective guidance processes, promoting educational inclusion, catalyzing innovative teaching methodologies, and sustaining relational wellbeing across the school community.

This institutional recognition, however, is far from being a mere legal or bureaucratic formality. It carries with it significant political and cultural weight. It signals a broader and more conscious societal recognition that pedagogy is, fundamentally, a public science—a discipline capable not only of interpreting educational realities but also of shaping policy, guiding systemic reform, and offering ethically grounded alternatives to technocratic models that prioritize measurement, standardization, and performativity. In a historical moment in which the educational experience risks being reduced to a sequence of quantifiable outcomes, the presence of the pedagogist serves to reassert the importance of deeper inquiry—choosing care over control, engaging in dialogical processes over mechanisms of selection and exclusion (Mortari, 2007).

Within the school setting, the pedagogist occupies a strategic and integrative role. They facilitate orientation practices and metacognitive planning, accompany the professional development of teaching staff, provide ongoing educational supervision, and offer crucial support in navigating the challenges of student difficulty and disengagement. Even more critically, the pedagogist contributes an epistemological and systemic perspective—bringing the capacity to interpret the educational context in all its complexity and to translate those insights into concrete, situated, and sustainable practices that respond to real needs.

This role becomes particularly indispensable in school environments marked by high degrees of complexity—contexts that are often shaped by student mobility, social and economic marginalization, or widespread conditions of educational disadvantage. In such scenarios, the work of the pedagogist is not limited to the correction of dysfunctions; rather, it aims to transform the very conditions that produce vulnerability, to empower educational communities, and to respond to the often-silent quest for meaning that resides within every learner. Yet, the real impact of these reforms depends not only on normative recognition but on a cultural shift that reimagines the school as a space of freedom, a symbolic and political arena—a genuine laboratory for democracy, coexistence, and civic imagination.

Within this broader and more ambitious horizon, the concept of educational guidance can be rethought in its full pedagogical and ethical dimension. It is no longer merely a technical function aimed at classifying or placing students. Instead, it becomes an act of educational and democratic responsibility—an ethical gesture rooted in care, mutual recognition, and the dignity of the person. In this perspective, guidance does not simply address the statistical manifestations of school dispersion—dropouts, delays, and chronic absenteeism—but also responds to subtler, more insidious crises: the erosion of meaning,

emotional detachment, passive learning attitudes, and the quiet disengagement of students from the educational process.

To respond adequately to these challenges, the school must reclaim its deeper cultural identity. It must once again become a generative space—one that creates bonds, nourishes creativity and critical thinking, and teaches young people not only how to acquire knowledge, but how to choose, to discern, and to envision a future. A school truly committed to guidance must also engage in critical self-reflection, asking what image of humanity it promotes, what learning it values, and what type of society it seeks to help build. Because guidance is never neutral—it necessarily reflects and enacts a vision of the world. It entails a commitment to educational equity, to radical forms of inclusion, and to the affirmation of the irreducible singularity of each individual learner (Mura, 2005).

Within this framework, the pedagogist—alongside newly introduced figures such as tutors and orientation teachers—emerges as a custodian of educational reflexivity and a facilitator of transformation. These professionals ensure that guidance is understood not as a form of passive alignment with external demands, but as a space for growth, freedom, and ethical responsibility. They champion an approach that educates rather than trains, that liberates rather than restricts, and that values difference as an asset rather than a deficit. Drawing on deep theoretical foundations and guided by an ethic of care, the pedagogist contributes to the shaping of a school that listens attentively to those who are often unheard, that affirms pluralism, and that sustains the lives and stories of its learners—not merely their careers or employability.

Recent organizational and legislative reforms—ranging from the formal establishment of the pedagogist’s professional role, to the integration of guidance-oriented staff, to the broader reimagining of school functions under the PNRR—delineate a courageous and forward-looking scenario for the Italian educational system. It is a scenario filled with promise, but one that will only be realized if supported by a robust, conscious, and evolving pedagogical culture. This culture must animate schools with the courage to innovate, the humility to listen, and the commitment to foster human flourishing in all its forms. Only through such a collective and sustained effort can schools become not only more human, but also more just, more inclusive, and more capable of educating individuals toward freedom, responsibility, and hope.

As Paulo Freire (1996) powerfully reminds us, “teaching is not transferring knowledge, but creating the conditions for learning to be possible.” In the critical years ahead, ensuring that such conditions are not only possible but enduring, meaningful, and equitable will stand among the most vital and noble responsibilities entrusted to the school as a democratic institution.

5. Conclusions and future directions

The reflections in this paper centre on a fundamental tension: the pressure to meet policy-driven goals for reducing dropout—often measured through quantitative indicators—and the pedagogical imperative to place the learner at the heart of education. Recent reforms in Italy, such as the introduction of tutors, guidance teachers, and student portfolio tools, mark important steps toward personalised and formative approaches. These initiatives signal growing recognition that early school leaving must be addressed through supportive, student-centred pathways, not just remedial or punitive measures.

However, critical challenges emerge in implementation. Creating new roles on paper does not guarantee their practical impact. Without institutional support, dedicated time, training in areas like counselling and coaching, and professional recognition, such roles risk becoming symbolic. Evidence from pilot projects shows that, when properly resourced, tutors can positively affect student outcomes (MIUR, 2014), but without these conditions, the impact is negligible.

Reforms also require favourable school-level structures: dedicated spaces for mentoring, integration of guidance in the school plan, and leadership committed to a vision of education as relational and developmental. Absent these, the rhetoric of guidance may remain disconnected from student experience.

A deeper issue concerns cultural change. Despite progressive policy language, many schools retain traditional, teacher-centred practices—rigid curricula, grading systems, and a focus on high-stakes assessments. Realising a formative orientation demands an epistemological shift: seeing education as a process that integrates knowledge, identity, and motivation. Without this, even innovative tools like e-Portfolios risk becoming superficial bureaucratic exercises.

The recent formal recognition of the pedagogist (Law 55/2024) offers an opportunity to foster this transformation. Positioned within schools as experts in educational processes, pedagogists can challenge reductive practices and support reflective, student-centred pedagogies. Yet this depends on political will, adequate resources, and the pedagogist's participation in curriculum design, leadership, and policy—not merely administrative tasks.

At the core lies the theoretical tension between formative and functional orientations. The former views students as authors of their own life projects; the latter reduces education to labour market alignment. This conflict appears in both policy documents and school practice, where guidance is too often reduced to administering standardised tests or suggesting pre-set career paths—disconnected from students' values or aspirations. Such technocratic approaches risk alienating those they aim to help.

The real challenge, then, is not simply reducing dropout rates, but restoring meaning to education. Students must see school as a space of possibility and growth. Dropout is not merely a statistical anomaly—it is a sign that schools must be places worth staying in. This requires a sustained alliance between policy, pedagogy, and everyday practice. Policymakers must ground reforms in sound educational principles; schools must have the flexibility and support to innovate. Professional networks, university partnerships, and community engagement are key. Teachers' identities must also evolve—from content deliverers to mentors and learning designers—through continuous professional development and reflection.

Reforms must also be structurally sustainable. PNRR-funded roles such as tutors and guidance teachers should be permanently integrated into school planning and resourced through stable funding. Broader collaboration with social services, NGOs, and local institutions is also crucial, as many dropout causes lie beyond the school's reach. Models like Finland's Ohjaamo or U.S. early warning systems provide useful comparative insights.

Looking ahead, several research priorities emerge. Empirical studies are necessary to assess whether narrative and metacognitive strategies reduce dropout and improve engagement. Both quantitative (e.g., quasi-experimental designs) and qualitative (e.g., case studies, interviews) research will be crucial in capturing both outcomes and student experiences. Comparative international research can help identify best practices and conditions for

success across contexts.

Theoretically, deeper integration between narrative pedagogy, metacognition, and guidance theory is important. Concepts like narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1990; McAdams, 1997) and agency could inform coherent curricular frameworks that support learners not only as thinkers, but as storytellers and decision-makers.

The core contribution of this paper lies in weaving together three strands—guidance, narrative, and metacognition—into a unified pedagogical vision. Addressing early school leaving requires not just policy tools, but a re-imagining of what education can and should be. At its heart, guidance is about the free and conscious development of the person. Preventing dropout is not just about retention, it is about ensuring every young person has the chance to author a life story in which education is a source of dignity, agency, and hope. Formative guidance, as expressed through narrative and metacognitive strategies, is not just a technique, it is a necessary act of trust in the transformative potential of every student and of education itself.

Reference list

- Black, P., Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5(1), 7–74
<http://doi.org/10.1080/0969595980050102>
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. Harvard University Press.
- Bastianoni, P. (2024). *La narrazione come strumento formativo nella relazione educativa*. Carocci.
- Clandinin, D. J. (2007). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. Sage.
- Cornoldi, C. (1997). *Metacognizione e apprendimento*. Il Mulino.
- Demetrio, D. (1996). *Raccontarsi: L'autobiografia come cura di sé*. Cortina.
- Demetrio, D. (2000). *L'educazione interiore. Introduzione alla pedagogia introspettiva*. La Nuova Italia.
- Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive–developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 34(10), 906–911
<http://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.10.906>
- Formenti, L. (2008). *Pedagogia delle relazioni*. Guerini.
- Formenti, L. (2017). *Formazione e trasformazione*. Cortina.
- Freire, P. (1974). *La pedagogia degli oppressi*. Mondadori.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my life and work*. Routledge.
- Honneth, A. (2002). *Recognition or redistribution? A philosophical exchange*. Verso Books.
- McAdams, D. P. (1997). *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*,

5(2), 100–122 <http://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>

- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- MIUR – Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca. (2014). *Linee guida nazionali per l’orientamento permanente* https://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/prot4232_14.pdf
- MIM – Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito. (2022). *Linee guida per l’orientamento* https://www.mim.gov.it/documents/20182/0/linee_guida_orientamento-2-STAMPA.pdf/4c926cff-afaa-8d3f-7176-09b3ec508d64?t=1703239848691
- MIM – Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito. (2023a). *Indicazioni operative per l’utilizzo del portfolio digitale* <https://www.mim.gov.it/web/miur-usr-marche/-/e-portfolio-dello-studente-indicazioni-per-la-compilazione-della-sezione-capolavoro->
- MIM – Ministero dell’Istruzione e del Merito. (2023b). *Nota operativa su docente tutor e orientatore* <https://www.mim.gov.it/web/molise/-/linee-guida-per-l-orientamento-il-tutor-scolastico-e-il-docente-orientatore>
- Mortari, L. (2006). *La pratica della cura educativa*. Bruno Mondadori.
- Mortari, L. (2007). *Cultura della ricerca e pedagogia*. Carocci.
- Mura, A. (2005). *L’orientamento formativo: Questioni storico-tematiche, problemi educativi e prospettive pedagogico-didattiche*. FrancoAngeli.
- Mura, A. (Ed.). (2018). *Orientamento formativo e progetto di vita: Narrazione e itinerari didattico-educativi*. FrancoAngeli.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Harvard University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Seuil.
- Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J. P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 75(3), 239–250 <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2009.04.004>
- Tramma, S., Demetrio, D. (2007). Il diario in pubblico. Scrivere di sé, raccontare il mondo. In D. Demetrio (Ed.), *Per una pedagogia e una didattica della scrittura* (pp. 307–311). Unicopli.