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Guiding before choice: engagement as the fundamental dimension of guidance in the 0-6 Integrated System

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Abstract: In recent years, the construct of guidance has been progressively reconceptualised as a continuous and widespread educational process (Aiello et al., 2023), aimed at supporting the individual in the construction of their own existential project (MIM, 2022). This perspective assumes particular relevance within the Integrated System of education and instruction from birth to six years of age, established by Legislative Decree 65/2017, in which guidance, since it cannot yet intertwine with the dimension of choice, is realised through the promotion of identity, autonomy, self-determination and participation.
This contribution proposes a review of national and international scientific literature aimed at investigating the relationship between guidance, technological innovation and engagement in the 0-6 integrated system. The hypothesis is that the guidance function in early childhood is realised primarily through the quality of educational relationships, participation, sense of belonging and the creation of inclusive contexts. In particular, educational technologies would appear to play a significant role, insofar as they can assume a guidance function to the extent that they contribute to the construction of meaningful relational contexts, capable of promoting social and affective involvement, autonomy and progressive self-determination.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the construct of guidance has undergone a profound

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reconceptualisation, which has progressively expanded its meaning, purposes and target recipients. Traditionally associated with moments of scholastic and professional transition and predominantly interpreted as support for decision-making processes, guidance is today recognised as a continuous and widespread educational process (Aiello et al., 2023), aimed at supporting the individual in the construction of their own existential project (MIM, 2022). From this perspective, it no longer configures itself as a practice circumscribed to the concluding phases of educational cycles, but rather becomes a structural dimension of education, which aims to promote, at the same time, the development of identity (Erikson, 1968), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and conscious participation in the social life of all and of each individual (Hooley et al., 2018).

This paradigm shift assumes particular relevance within the Integrated System of education and instruction from birth to six years of age, established by Legislative Decree 65/2017, in which guidance can evidently not be interpreted in terms of preparation for choice, but seems to fully express its authentically pedagogical and formative value, becoming a process aimed at creating the conditions whereby each child may progressively recognise their own potentialities, experience increasing levels of autonomy and construct a positive image of themselves in relation to others and to the world. Such an approach, moreover, proves consistent with the perspective outlined by the Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated zero-to-six system (MIM, 2021), which recognise in educational services and in preschool privileged contexts for the promotion of the global development of the person through experiences grounded in relationship, participation and the shared construction of meanings (National Commission for the Integrated System, 2021). Within this framework, therefore, to guide would mean to propose educational experiences capable of recognising the child as a competent subject, unique in their potentialities and an active protagonist of their own processes of growth.

However, if such an approach now appears consolidated in pedagogical reflection and in the regulatory framework recalled above, it is of particular interest to inquire into the processes through which guidance may take shape in early childhood. The hypothesis guiding the present reflection is that the guidance function of 0-6 services is realised not so much through interventions explicitly dedicated to choice, as in the quality of daily educational relationships, in the promotion of a sense of belonging, in authentic participation and in the creation of emotionally

safe and inclusive contexts, through experiences of active involvement. In this regard, educational technologies and digital environments, increasingly widespread also in early childhood services, could be seen as tools capable of promoting authentic forms of social and affective engagement. In line with what has been highlighted by numerous studies (Laurillard, 2012; Bond et al., 2020), indeed, such innovations can be considered a valuable support for the construction of dynamic and stimulating contexts, which sustain the self-determination and active participation of each individual (Giaconi, 2015; Selwyn, 2016; Rivoltella, 2020). The literature more specifically dedicated to early childhood (Arnott, 2016; Plowman & McPake, 2013) suggests, however, that this relationship be considered with caution. The presence of technology, indeed, does not appear in itself sufficient to produce pedagogically relevant outcomes, since its value depends on the modalities, the purposes and the relational contexts within which it is integrated (Di Bari et al., 2026), in accordance with the phenomenological perspective, according to which an object assumes educational value not for its intrinsic characteristics, but in relation to the meanings that the subjects themselves attribute to it and to the conditions of use (Husserl, 2002; Bertolini, 1988, 2001).

2. Guidance, technological innovation and engagement: a literature review

Moving from the considerations set out thus far, this contribution presents a review of the relevant national and international scientific literature, with the aim of examining in depth the relationship between guidance, technological innovation and engagement in the 0-6 integrated system. In particular, the objective of the research is to investigate the theoretical and pedagogical premises that would make it possible to interpret the use of technology as a tool capable of encouraging social and affective involvement, understood as a possible foundational dimension of guidance processes in early childhood.

The review is structured around four lines of inquiry:

1. The reconceptualisation of guidance in early childhood and the role assumed by environment, relationship, agency, autonomy and participation in developmental processes;

2. The concept of engagement, considering its multidimensional nature and its relationship with the quality of educational contexts;

3. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and social and emotional competences as dimensions connected to participation and child development;

4. The use of digital technologies in early childhood educational services, with particular attention to pedagogical documentation, digital storytelling and collaborative and reflective practices.

Starting from these lines of inquiry, this work aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How is guidance interpreted in the literature on early childhood, and which dimensions of development are considered relevant to the construction of autonomy and agency?

2. What roles do social and emotional engagement, sense of belonging and socio-emotional competences assume in the processes of participation and development in 0-6 contexts?

3. In what ways can educational technologies, pedagogical documentation and digital practices contribute to the construction of relational and participatory contexts coherent with guidance processes?

2.1 Guidance, agency and the quality of educational contexts

If the child is not an incomplete adult, but rather the constructor of their own personality through continuous interaction with the environment (Montessori, 1962), and education is the process whereby each person is accompanied in the constant attempt to elaborate and transform their own reality (Freire, 1970), then pedagogical action must not anticipate the person's future, but rather create the conditions whereby they may structure it. It would follow, therefore, that the quality of the educational environment assumes a determining function in the guidance processes of early childhood, in line with the ecological perspective, according to which the growth of the individual is the result of the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the person and the multiple life contexts in which they are situated (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2006). The relevant scientific literature (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Hedegaard, 2020; Varpanen, 2020) has, in fact, extensively demonstrated how it is the daily

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experiences of exploration, play, relationship, dialogue and peer interaction that enable girls and boys to experience their own effectiveness, recognise interests and inclinations, build confidence in their own abilities and develop an initial form of agency (Aiello, 2024; Aiello & Giaconi, 2024), understood as the capacity to exercise intentional, reflective and transformative action upon their own developmental pathway.

Guidance thus assumes the features of a process that permeates the everyday life of educational services and is realised in the design of inclusive contexts which, through the establishment of meaningful relationships grounded in a sense of belonging, participation and the shared construction of meanings (Selwyn, 2016; Rivoltella, 2020), render the child capable of structuring their own identity and of opening themselves to future planning, with a view to valuing the uniqueness of all and of each individual.

2.2 Engagement and participation in 0-6 contexts

In this direction, studies on engagement and on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) appear to offer a particularly interesting interpretive key, insofar as they would make it possible to understand how involvement in educational contexts represents a constitutive dimension of children's personal and social development. The relevance of this line of inquiry is particularly evident in the literature specifically referring to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) contexts. A scoping review by Ritoša et al. (2023), which examined 286 quantitative studies on children's engagement in early childhood educational services, highlights a significant heterogeneity in the definitions and methods of measurement of the construct. The authors further note that engagement is frequently observed through the child's behaviours and interactions with the social and material environment. Such evidence reinforces the opportunity to consider engagement as a situated phenomenon strictly connected to the characteristics of the educational context, rather than as an exclusively individual disposition. The international literature, indeed, describes engagement as a multidimensional construct grounded in behavioural, cognitive and emotional components (Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2008; Wang & Eccles, 2011), which refers to the quality of the relationship that the subject establishes with the educational experience, expressing itself through interest, motivation, perseverance, personal investment and authentic participation in learning processes. What has

been said would imply that interactions, climate and sense of belonging could be seen as determining factors for child development (Skinner et al., 2008; Bond et al., 2020) and that, even in technologically mediated environments, the quality of relationships and of involvement prove indispensable elements for technologies themselves to produce positive effects on competence acquisition processes (Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In the case of early childhood, the scoping review by Ritoša et al. (2023) further invites us to keep the notion of engagement distinct from that of involvement, highlighting how the literature employs these concepts according to senses that are not always overlapping. Hence arises the need to adopt a sufficiently articulated definition of involvement, capable of considering both the observable manifestations of participation and the child's experiential dimension.

2.3 Social and Emotional Learning and the socio-emotional dimension

In the wake of such considerations, the construct of engagement intertwines with the paradigm of Social and Emotional Learning, which identifies in socio-emotional competences the fundamental dimensions for the education and well-being of the person (CASEL, 2024). Such competences would therefore constitute the fundamental prerequisite for girls and boys to participate meaningfully in the life of the educational community, developing confidence in their own abilities and experiencing progressive forms of autonomy and responsibility. Even before confronting scholastic or professional choices, indeed, they construct their own capacity to orient themselves in the world through experiences that enable them to attribute meaning to their lived experience and to perceive themselves as competent subjects capable of affecting reality. Blewitt et al. (2018), through a systematic review and meta-analysis of SEL interventions in early childhood education and care contexts, analysed 79 studies, for a total of 18,292 participants, detecting significant improvements in social and emotional competences, self-regulation and early learning, as well as a reduction in behavioural difficulties. Similarly, Murano et al. (2020), through a meta-analysis of 48 studies conducted on 15,498 preschool-aged children, detected small-to-moderate effects of SEL interventions on the development of social and emotional competences and on the reduction of problematic behaviours.

2.4 Digital technologies, pedagogical documentation and storytelling

From this perspective, digital pedagogical documentation tools (Carr, 2001; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017) and multimedia narratives of experiences (Robin, 2008, 2016; O'Byrne et al., 2018; Rahiem, 2021) can also be interpreted as guidance devices, insofar as they render growth processes traceable, foster shared reflection among all the actors involved and sustain the progressive construction of identity (NAEYC & Fred Rogers Centre, 2012; National Commission for the Integrated System, 2022). The literature on pedagogical documentation offers, in this regard, some useful elements to refine such an interpretation. The systematic review by Alaçam and Olgan (2021), based on 24 empirical studies published between 2006 and 2019, highlights the effects of pedagogical documentation not only on children, but also on teachers and families, showing its value as a relational device capable of sustaining infant self-regulation, teachers' professional reflexivity and school-family communication. More specifically with regard to the digital dimension, the systematic review by Silva and Paiva (2023) detected the use primarily of photographs and videos and underscored the need to guarantee effective participation of children in documentary processes, pointing out that such involvement is not an automatic outcome of the technology adopted, but rather a condition to be intentionally constructed: an observation that confirms how the guidance value of these devices depends on the modalities whereby they are integrated into the educational relationship, rather than on their availability.

3. Discussion and concluding reflections

In the light of the review conducted, social and affective involvement would assume a pedagogical relevance that transcends the dimension of learning, configuring itself as a privileged modality through which guidance takes shape in early childhood. The promotion of a sense of belonging, authentic participation, inclusive communication and emotional co-regulation would, indeed, represent an investment in the development of the person and in their future capacity for self-determination. To this end, digital environments too should be designed as relational contexts capable of sustaining experiences of shared reflection and the construction of meanings (Rivoltella, 2020). The most recent literature on digital pedagogy in early childhood makes it possible to further refine this position: Li et al. (2024) emphasise the centrality of choices concerning when, why and how to integrate technologies into

pedagogical processes. It follows that any guidance function of technologies should not be attributed to the tool as such, but traced back to the educational and relational practices within which it is embedded.

What has been outlined thus far would appear, at this point, to offer the tools useful for answering the questions posed at the outset.

With regard to the first question, it has emerged how in early childhood the guidance process cannot be read exclusively in its dimension of preparation for choice, but must rather be reinterpreted as a pedagogical device that sustains the construction of identity (Erikson, 1968), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wehmeyer, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2020), active participation (Hooley et al., 2018) and an initial form of agency (Varpanen, 2020; Aiello, 2024; Aiello & Giaconi, 2024). This process takes shape in the daily experiences of exploration, play, relationship and dialogue (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Hedegaard, 2020) and is strongly influenced by the quality of the environment in which the child is immersed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This re-semantisation, however, suggests a reflection: by assimilating the characteristics of a quality educational experience to the elements that, in contexts dedicated to childhood, contribute to the realisation of an initial form of guidance, the latter risks becoming co-extensive with education itself and being confused with it. It would therefore seem appropriate to underscore that what distinguishes an educational practice from a specifically guidance-oriented practice is the pedagogical intentionality that guides its design and implementation. Transposing, indeed, onto the pedagogical plane the Husserlian interpretation of intentionality, understood as a structure of consciousness constitutively directed towards something (Husserl, 2002), educational action can be read as an action oriented towards the possible: the educator, in fact, moves in a pedagogically defined direction, without this implying any claim to predetermine the outcome of the educational process, but rather assuming the responsibility of arranging the conditions whereby the subject may have experience, attribute meaning to what they live and progressively acquire an active role in their own developmental pathway (Sabatano & Pagano, 2019).

With respect to the second question, it has emerged that engagement could be seen as a central construct due to its multidimensionality and situatedness, yet at the same time still fragile on the operational plane, insofar as a marked heterogeneity of definitions and measurement instruments is documented. From this evidence derives the need to adopt

due interpretive caution, first of all with regard to the transferability of the construct, since the theoretical models on which the argument is founded examine other age groups (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2008; Bond et al., 2020) and their employment in the 0-6 system would therefore represent a conceptual extension still to be argued. Furthermore, the distinction between engagement and involvement (Ritoša et al., 2023) requires that involvement not be reduced to observable manifestations alone. From the perspective of Special Pedagogy, indeed, it is plausible to hypothesise that a construct recognised predominantly through expected behaviours proves less sensitive to non-conventional expressive modalities, such as those that may characterise, for example, children with special educational needs.

As regards, finally, the third question, the relevant scientific literature analysed locates the value of technologies in pedagogical choices (Li et al., 2024) and in their intentional and conscious use (NAEYC & Fred Rogers Center, 2012), in accordance with the phenomenological perspective, according to which an object assumes educational value in the meanings that subjects attribute to it (Bertolini, 1988, 2001; Husserl, 2002). The guidance function is not to be understood, then, as an intrinsic property of the digital tool employed: documentation can render growth processes traceable and sustain identity construction (National Commission for the Integrated System, 2022) only if the child is its co-author and not merely an object of observation.

Taken as a whole, therefore, the answers to the three questions posed in this work converge towards a single acquisition: in early childhood, guidance would not appear able to be concretised in the arrangement of pathways aimed at expressing a choice, but is constructed in the intentional quality of relationships, practices and contexts, within which the child is recognised as an active constructor of their own identity.

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