

Chapter 24

Expanding the Boundaries of Learning: The Role of Vocational Orientation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the socio-cultural dimension useful when schools plan measures for coping with the requirements of a complex society. In particular, an examination of a project on vocational orientation is proposed for the liaison of school with work. This project can contribute to the discussion about the need to bridge the gap between the business community and the world of education; to a reflection on the development of students' identity and about the importance of a socio-cultural dimension for a complex assessment of learning. This perspective is illustrated here in the description of a project of career counseling for the liaison of school with work in a school situated in a context of economic and social hardship, in the south of Italy.

INTRODUCTION

Many activities can be organized to enable the easy transition from school to work. This important link between the educational institution and the community allows the opening new environment of learning and expanding knowledge. However, schools all too often plan their activities without taking into account their own geographic,

economic and social context. This divergence prevents students from recognizing the value of what they have learned, because are not linked with the frame of meaning of their social and cultural framework.

This chapter describes a project that was implemented in a school situated in a context of economic and social hardship and it highlights some useful points for a culturally integrated planning.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2122-0.ch024

It also presents a reflection on how schools can be empowered to lead the organization of activities in collaboration with the community and in answer to its needs. In this way, the project making students aware of their capacity to really contribute to the growth of their community and hence, to design their own work career. This project states the conviction that, beyond political and national interventions, each school can actively contribute to addressing this urgent employment issue.

The project was conducted in the year 2010/2011 in the south of Italy, in the Calabria region. The area is known for its severe poverty and low economic development, with different forms of violence. Specifically, Calabria has 38.4% of municipalities affected by mafia criminal organizations (CENSIS 2011, p.50), particularly in the fields of extortion, usury and drug trafficking.

The vocational school is called “Professional Institute of Agriculture and the Environment,” located in a small town near Cosenza: It is a isolated mountain area with few connections and few infrastructures. The number of students in the Institute has been growing over the past five years and there are now 142 students, (Male=78, Female=64 female) in the 2010/2011. A high percentage of them are employed in family working activities, such as agriculture. This situation leads to an irregular school attendance, and even to dropping out. In such a context, we want to emphasize how the school must plan the growth of the student in his community, offering activities and programs intertwined with the reality of the student. So, the project – described below – aims to promote a more effective intervention by enhancing the value of the cultural and social dimension.

This project is backed by the Italian regional law n. 19/2007, established to bridge the gap between the business community and the world of education. The main objective of the project is to respond to the emergency of a dialogue between educational institution and stakeholders, involving school staff, teachers, students, families and local firms.

25 students, of which two had special educational needs, participated in the project. They were in various class grades, ranging from 7 in third grade, 8 in fourth grade and 10 in fifth grade. Their ages ranging from 16 to 18. In the project were involved 28 teachers from different disciplines. These included; History of Rural Traditions, Elements of Agricultural Economics and Law, Applied Ecology, Agro-Environmental Technology, Principles of Food, Italian and History. There were also 35 parents, who had a supportive role and helped with the resolution of behavioral problems. Six local firms in agriculture and food also offered an important collaboration for the great success of the project.

The tools and methodologies used in the project were chosen to create continuity between the classroom and the working contexts. Collaborative learning modes were used, mainly in group activities, preparatory to the introduction in the professional context. Heterogeneous skills were represented in each group, with the teacher acting as facilitator. Each student in the group was invited to kept a “Personal diary” for write in an open way their impressions, reflections and emotions during the experience.

Various assessment tools were used in the project. These included a questionnaire completed by on-the-job tutors and students, and a grid for assessing the level of interest, motivation and attention of the students during the stages and students self-evaluation.

The artifacts produced by the students were also analyzed, and there were also assessment questionnaires for their parents. These assessment tools were used repeatedly during the project, for a quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

BACKGROUND

The knowledge society in which we are immersed devotes a growing attention to competences. In fact, it has been argued that it is important to

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