ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Working with Underachieving Students in Higher Education

Fostering inclusion through narration and reflexivity

Edited by
Maria Francesca Freda,
José González-Monteagudo
and Giovanna Esposito

ROUTLEDGE

'This book is a "must read" for anyone interested in underachievement. The authors articulate underachievement with reflexivity difficulties and use narrative construction of meaning as a path to stimulate reflexivity and improve academic success. As a researcher on narrative and psychotherapy, I particularly appreciated the way narrative as a holistic concept fits this project: narratives are not just in the "heads" of people, but are also in their bodies and in the socio-symbolic constructions people share with each other. A very rich, creative and solid contribution!'

Miguel M. Gonçalves, Professor, University of Minho, Portugal

'Improving the life chances of non-traditional and underachieving students is one of the most important contributions that higher education can make to social mobility and social justice. This book focuses on the role of narrative approaches in fostering reflexivity, and thereby promoting learner agency. I've always sought to teach in ways that are challenging but inclusive, demanding but empowering, and this book comes as an important resource.'

John Field, Emeritus Professor, School of Education, Stirling University, UK

'This book is a major advancement in the application of narrative techniques in the context of students who are in trouble with themselves in the context of higher education. The focus on (under)achievement is translated here into reflexivity as observed in narrative practices. The development of new techniques is well described in the book, and should be of great interest to practitioners in counselling and higher education administrators.'

Jaan Valsiner, Niels Bohr Professor of Cultural Psychology,
Aalborg University, Denmark

'I consider this book a useful proposal for students, researchers and practitioners. The current situation is exacerbating the vulnerability and undermining solidarity, so attention to inclusion and to at-risk individuals is crucial. I emphasize the value of the topic, the focus on reflexivity and its analysis from different points of view, as well as the focus on strengthening the reflexivity in particular in at-risk individuals.'

Salvatore Soresi, Full Professor, University of Padua, Italy

'This is an important book from an interdisciplinary, multi-national team, wrestling with issues of under-achievement in higher education, and how this might be addressed in theory and practice. The study begins from the premise of the importance of social inclusion in Europe. The book pushes us towards new thinking, in the use of narrative and reflexivity, to enable unconfident learners to consider their academic and personal struggles in a developmental frame. This book is a real resource of hope in a hard-pressed university world.'

Linden West, Professor, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

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Working with Underachieving Students in Higher Education

Working with Underachieving Students in Higher Education: Fostering inclusion through narration and reflexivity presents an international and interdisciplinary approach to the study of the relationships between narrative devices and reflexivity in higher education. Stemming from a collaborative European research project called INSTALL (Innovative Solutions to Acquire Learning to Learn), it focuses on an innovative model aimed at promoting personal resources and reflective competencies in non-traditional, disadvantaged and underachieving students.

The book is divided into three sections, with the first providing an exploration of the key theoretical issues that formed the basis of the theoretical and methodological approaches in the INSTALL Project. The second section presents an innovative narrative methodology and discusses the most significant phases of the training process and of the main products. The third and last section provides a broad discussion of higher education policies and of the need to encourage innovation and reforms to improve the academic inclusion of underachieving students. Chapters in the collection examine interventions in Italy, Romania, Ireland and Spain, using a broad transnational, intercultural and comparative approach, to consider narrative tools using four channels: metaphoric, iconographic, writing and the body.

This book provides theoretical insights and practical methodologies which can be used to enhance quality teaching and innovation, as well as to help adapt to diversity in higher education. It will, therefore, be of key interest to academics, researchers and postgraduate students in the fields of higher education; sociology of education; education policy and politics; cultural and developmental psychology; and narrative research, as well as to those studying counselling, mentoring and coaching.

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Fostering inclusion through narration and reflexivity

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Foreword

As a reader that has had the chance to read this volume before its publications, I have the privileged opportunity to draw attention to the many points of interest that make *Working with Underachieving Students in Higher Education* a remarkable piece of work, food for thought for a variety of audiences – researchers, professionals, policymakers.

This book, and the action-research that it documents, provides the field of higher education studies with an innovative conceptual framework – psychodynamic and semiotic cultural psychology. Cultural psychology has been developing for the last three decades, triggered by the recovery of Vygotsky's lesson (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Shweder, 2000). Within this stream of thought, a specific role has been played by the semiotic interpretation of the notion of culture (Valsiner, 2007, 2014; Valsiner and Rosa, 2012), in turn integrated with the psychodynamic recognition of the affective dimension of meaning (Salvatore and Freda, 2011; Salvatore and Zittoun, 2011). According to this semiotic and psychodynamic cultural psychology, human experience – and, more generally, the phenomena psychology deals with (micro- and macro-social processes) – consists of *dynamics of sensemaking*, namely ongoing intersubjective processes of (cognitive and affective) interpretation of the experience by means of infinite recursive transactions among signs.

If cultural theory offers a new look at psychological phenomena, the semiotic and psychodynamic interpretation of it represents an innovation within the innovation. Indeed, it provides a processual, dynamic reading of the category "culture", which goes beyond a naïve, substantialist view of it (Salvatore and Venuleo, 2013; Valsiner, 2007). The naïve view sees culture as a self-contained entity affecting the functioning of whatever interacts with it (e.g. people's way of thinking, customs, norms etc.). According to such a standpoint, typical of cross-cultural studies – a social group *has/shares* a culture, and this culture determines some of its important qualities, for example behaviour X, common within the group, is due to the culture of the social group. Epistemological and theoretical arguments have been raised for criticizing such a substantialist view of culture (e.g. Valsiner, 2007; Salvatore, 2016a). However, the view of culture as a

dynamics of sensemaking, rather than a "thing", makes it possible to adopt cultural psychology as the conceptual framework for local, field interventions in specific domains of human affairs, such as the higher education field. Indeed, interventions have to address people involved in practices mediated by, comprising and under the constraints of the institutional, pragmatic and social milieu; in sum, interventions are *movements dealing with movements*. Therefore, strategies and methodologies for promoting changes and empowerment need to be grounded on epistemological and theoretical frameworks that enable the "present moment" of the dynamics in action (Stern, 2004) to be grasped and enacted, along with their immanent, situated determinants and constraints. The shift from seeing culture as a reified entity acting externally to an ongoing process of sensemaking offers just such an enhancement – the chance of providing interventions with a clear, feasible identification of *for what, where, how and on what* to act.

In fact, in recent years semiotic and psychodynamic cultural psychology has been developing not only at the theoretical level but also as a *general theory of the method* – both research method (e.g. Valsiner *et al.*, 2009) and intervention method (Salvatore and Valsiner, 2014). A significant contribution to this development has been made by the tradition of clinical psychology developed by Carli and colleagues (Carli, 1987, 1996, 2007; Carli and Giovagnoli, 2011; Carli and Paniccia, 1999, 2003). Since the 1980s, Carli has developed a psychoanalytically oriented theory of the psychological intervention based on a view of the unconscious as a processual component of intersubjective and institutional processes. Thanks to this theory, clinical psychology is no longer confined within the limits of psychopathology or of the critical conditions that traditionally require the help of a psychologist (for a criticism of the concept of "help" in the psychological intervention, see Salvatore and Valsiner, 2006). Rather, it acquires the status of the *psychological theory of intervention*, enabling psychologists to address a vast plurality of issues of development and empowerment (e.g. institutional building, strategic marketing, territorial cohesion, customer satisfaction, school drop-out etc.).

The Neapolitan group leading the INSTALL Project is an active, representative expression of both such lines of work. As such it has made a fundamental contribution to their integration, in the perspective of a *culturally informed clinical psychology*. The Neapolitan team has been involved for the past two decades in various fields of intervention – health (e.g. Martino *et al.,* 2013; De Luca Picione *et al.*, 2015), school (e.g. Esposito *et al.*, 2013; Esposito and Freda, 2015), higher education (e.g. Esposito and Freda, 2016; Freda, Esposito and Quaranta, 2015) – at the same time offering an important contribution to the enhancement of the theory and methodology of cultural psychology (Salvatore and Freda, 2011; Freda, 2008, 2011; Freda, De Luca Picione and Martino, 2015). This book is therefore the point of arrival – at the moment – of an innovative, courageous and fruitful line

of work, which paves the way for further theoretical and methodological developments.

Several markers of such developments are already present in this volume.

First, the approach adopted by the project integrates the systemic and actor-focused levels of analysis and intervention. As is clearly discussed in the book (see Chapter 1, in particular), the basic idea is that academic performances and outcomes are a function of the resources the educational milieu makes available to actors (technologies, curricula, services supporting inclusion etc.), but this function is mediated by the actors' competence to recognize and use them. And this competence is not an invariant quality of the single individual but a function of the way the person interprets the institutional and intersubjective context of activity in which they are embedded. In sum, system and actor cannot be separated – academic performances and outcomes are a matter of their recursive linkage, which is sustained by ongoing, recursive acts of sensemaking.

This integrated view is not relevant for theoretical reasons alone – it has a strategic implication for the definition of the aims and domains of competence of the psychological intervention. Indeed, it leads us to go beyond the view of the psychological intervention as focused on individuals as such, regardless of the situated, contextual conditions of activity that motivate, mediate and define the purpose of the interventions (the latter are left to other disciplines and professional systems). INSTALL overcomes such a reified view of the individual – psychological processes do not work in a vacuum, as self-contained entities; they acquire their shape as the enactment of sensemaking that cannot but be *situated*, namely triggered, channelled, made up and mediated by the specific content of the system of activity in which they are embedded. Accordingly, the psychological intervention in the domain of higher education – as well as potentially in any domain of human affairs (Salvatore, 2016b) – is "psychological", not because it addresses a psychological entity affecting such a domain from the outside, but because it is grounded on a psychological theoretical and methodological framework providing a specific way of viewing the higher education context and the way of acting on it in order to make it more inclusive.

Second, and strictly connected to the previous point, INSTALL is a seminal instance of the fact that cultural psychology's recognition of the situatedness and contingency of the psychological processes (Salvatore, 2014) is a premise for successful interventions. This is because it enables psychological processes to be understood and dealt with in terms of the idiosyncratic contextual forms they assume. As Freda and colleagues state in the first chapter: "Risk, protective factors and resources are, therefore, context specific and interdependent" (p. 14). On the other hand, this recognition does not prevent generalization but only prevents the traditional, nomothetic and inductive logic of generalization (Salvatore, 2014). Indeed, INSTALL is an example of a different approach to generalization, based on *abduction* – it provides an abstract theoretical framework enabling the