

Peer orientation: The experience of Buddies as mediators in students' transition to university

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Abstract

The complexity of today's society requires us to rethink education and training methods and strategies in order to restore meaning to the human experience. This paper analyses the value of peer support, based on the experience of the "Buddy Programme" at an Italian university between 2022 and 2025. Through reciprocal peer teaching, the project fosters an inclusive and collaborative academic culture. The study reports the results of an empirical survey of 133 students, revealing that 94% of respondents view the Buddies as essential for overcoming cognitive and emotional disorientation. In conclusion, the study highlights how peer support responds to the authentic needs of the new generations for listening and participation.

Keywords: Orientation; peer learning; collaborative learning.

1. The value of orientation in a period of educational and cultural crisis

Wars, youth distress, poverty, and inequality paint a picture of uncertainty and disorientation that arises "not only when there is no plan for the future, but also when the present constitutes - in subjective perception - a confused and indistinct magma" (Arioli, 2023, p. 48). These widespread and interconnected crises, coupled with the need to prepare the younger generations for the transitions of the present, have made it necessary to strengthen guidance services. In fact, Italian schools and universities have expanded these services, based on the Guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Merit (M.I.M.), which state that "orientation constitutes [...] a responsibility for all levels and types of schools, for teachers, for families, and for the various institutional and social actors with whom the student interacts" (M.I.M., 2022, pp. 4-5).

With Decree No. 934 of August 3, 2022, the Italian Ministry of University and Research (M.U.R.), in collaboration with the M.I.M., launched, as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (N.R.R.P.), the Active Guidance Program for the School-to-University Transition. This has allowed students in their third, fourth, and fifth years of upper secondary

school to participate in 15-hour orientation paths promoted by universities and centers for advanced training in the arts, music, and dance. The aim is to facilitate and encourage the transition from upper secondary school to universities, reduce school dropout rates (Batini, 2023), and connect young people's aspirations, study path choices, professional skills, and employability. Orientation cannot be viewed as a bureaucratic formality but represents an educational and formative journey that accompanies students in the process of self-determination, helping them cultivate their freedom and develop their personal potential and talents (Valentino, 2025). Universities have implemented activities and established services. The activities carried out have prioritized workshop-based teaching and hands-on experiences, fostering active learning based on collaboration and dialogue rather than competition. To enhance learning, self-esteem, and relational, social, cognitive, and motivational skills (Dawson, 2004), the role of student tutor has been introduced to support less experienced students. Peer tutoring fosters metacognitive competence: it can be viewed as a process that leverages dialogue, social interaction, and joint reflection as positive elements, useful for individual and collective growth and for the development of skills (Zhang, 2023). In this paper, which reports on an experience carried out at the University of Perugia, we analyze aspects related to a reciprocal peer tutoring program within the framework of an Orientation and Tutoring Plan (P.O.T.).

2. The Project

Students in the Bachelor's Degree Program in Education and Training Sciences (Degree Class L-19) at the University of Perugia participated, in the three-year period 2022–2025, in the P.O.T. program called “Verso. Orientation and tutoring systems for educational and training professions”. As part of this project, which involved 28 degree programs in Degree Class L-19, 141 schools, 94 companies, and 110 organizations across the national territory, a reciprocal peer tutoring initiative was introduced through the creation of the Buddy Group. The group's purpose was to support students in their learning challenges and achieve their individual study and career goals. Objectives were defined regarding informational, formative, and outgoing guidance. However, the main focus was on formative orientation, carried out mainly by peers coordinated by the department's professors.

3. Buddy Group training

To achieve the project's objectives, a group of students with different ages, skills, and experiences was formed and trained in specific content: university study methods, course organization and study plans, effective communication, and the use of platforms. The content was selected by identifying the educational objectives of the Buddy tutors. The Buddy Group was designed primarily to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) establish a support/orientation group for first-year students;
- 2) support students throughout the three-year program;
- 3) make the university environment a collaborative environment among peers;
- 4) develop the Buddy group's autonomy in peer orientation activities.

The training activities were designed to respond to the needs of the Buddies, aiming to develop dialogic, collaborative, and creative skills, as well as decision-making and organizational autonomy. The greatest difficulty was encountered in this last area. It was not easy for the Buddy Group to proceed independently. Consultation with faculty was frequent: the group expected precise instructions to operate and design interventions. Instead, the Buddies were intentionally confronted with operational and management challenges. It became necessary to coordinate the initial project activities, provide operational guidance, and initiate a process of negotiating meanings and languages. After a complex planning and organizational phase, a space rich in collisions (Coyle, 2024) and stimuli was created that enabled fruitful and constructive interaction based on respect for each Buddy's individual skills, interests, and aptitudes. After an initial phase that was quite delicate and complex from an organizational standpoint, the Buddies began their work. Orientation interventions were carried out, as well as the production of various materials (brochures, subject presentation slides, and interviews with experts in the educational sectors). The group acted as a bridge between students, professors, and the university institution (Zuccoli, 2020), facilitating communication and relationships, creating an authentic experience of reciprocal peer tutoring. The Buddy Program allowed for the creation of an open, collaborative, and participatory community. The initial lack of formal and executive instructions from the professors was not immediately understood by the group; however, it gradually allowed participants to engage in role-playing, choosing "how" and "why" to act. The intentional and collaboratively designed action of the Buddy Group fostered the development of new perspectives and expectations among both the participants and the involved student community. This willingness to support peers is not a negligible element; rather, it gives body and soul to the educational relationship: soul as driving force, motivation, desire, and will; body as a concrete experiential dimension, lived in the university space and over the course of the educational path (academic year, help desk activities).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research questions

Within this contextual and scientific framework, the need to investigate the subjective dimension of those receiving such orientation emerges. In line with this objective, we chose to conduct a study using a mixed-methods questionnaire, considered the most appropriate tool for

capturing both expectations and perceptions regarding the role of the knowledgeable peer for orientation (Buddy).

The pedagogical literature suggests that the effectiveness of a support mechanism does not depend exclusively on the correctness of informational procedures, but rather on the ability to generate emotional connection (Decety & Meyer, 2008) and mutual recognition among the actors involved. In this scenario, the Buddy acts not only as a facilitator in the processes but as a mediator of meaning. By speaking a shared semantic (Waterhouse, 1991) and biographical language, the Buddy is able to promote student agency, supporting their self-determination within the university context. To better understand incoming students' perceptions of this figure and their willingness to consult them, the questionnaire was structured into two sections using the Google Forms platform. The first part was designed to collect quantitative data. Composed of closed-ended questions, this section aimed to outline the profile of students interested in the program who attended the orientation sessions using descriptive data such as age, institution of origin, prior academic history, and previous interactions with figures similar to the Buddy.

The second part, consisting of five exploratory questions (Fig. 1), aimed to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the role of the Buddy and the course of study program.

Table 1. Qualitative questions proposed in the questionnaire

Nº	Proposed questions
1	At first glance, do you think about the Buddy's function?
2	Do you plan to reach out to them?
3	What is your stance on potentially taking on a similar role in the future?
4	What expectations, if any, do you have of this course of study?
5	What specific doubts or concerns, if any, do you have regarding your choice?

Two research questions guided the development of this tool. The first was related to the perception of the Buddy figure, while the second stemmed from a desire to understand the potential impact - both temporary and long-term - on the transition to university.

RQ1 - What are incoming students' perceptions of the Buddy figure, and what functions do they attribute to it?

RQ2 - How does the Buddy figure contribute to promoting student agency during the transition to university?

4.2. Participants

The survey was conducted over four days between April and September, dedicated to orientation for those entering the bachelor's degree program. The meetings were designed to increase knowledge of the academic offerings and career opportunities provided by the Degree Course in Educational Sciences. Therefore, given the context of the survey administration, a

convenience sampling strategy was adopted (Golzar et al., 2022), involving students who had participated in these initiatives. More than 200 participants attended these days; of these, after the purpose of the questionnaire and the responses were explained, 133 decided to complete the questionnaire. These individuals constitute the sample for this study, 89.5% (119 individuals) of whom are under the age of 23. For the vast majority of them (88.7%), this is their first university experience, marking a transition that constitutes a true rite of passage (Biasin & Porcarelli, 2016). Regarding educational background, 66 out of 133 students come from high schools specializing in the humanities or classics, reflecting a continuum in the study curriculum toward educational professions (Degree Class L-19).

4.3. Data analysis

At the end of the orientation initiatives, the questionnaire administration procedure was completed; subsequently, it was closed and the collected data were exported and numbered. The quantitative data collected in the first section were analyzed using descriptive statistics to outline the main characteristics of the sample and identify general trends related to the variables under investigation. The open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, an approach that has proven useful in previous studies for understanding new policies for educational institutions (Yeung & Yau, 2022). In a first phase, the entire text corpus was read several times to become familiar with the content and identify elements relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, open coding was performed, taking as units of analysis text segments with complete meaning and grouping them based on semantic similarities. This allowed us to identify the main recurring themes in the students' responses, the ways in which they portray the role of the Buddy, and to understand the meaning of these representations through emerging themes (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). This process allowed us to identify a coherent thematic structure, organized around the main dimensions investigated in the study (perception of usefulness, trust, accessibility, and contribution to orientation). To ensure methodological adherence and the systematic nature of the analysis, a 16-item checklist (Ahmed et al., 2025) was applied, guiding the correct implementation of the six typical steps of thematic analysis. The identified themes were understood as interpretive constructs capable of giving meaning to the experiences reported by the students. Furthermore, the analysis made it possible to link the empirical findings to the theoretical framework, highlighting the role of the Buddy as a cognitive, emotional, and relational mediator within university orientation processes.

5. Results

The data analyzed shows that most students perceive the Buddy role as an innovative element. Specifically, 78.9% (n=105) of respondents stated that they had never encountered a similar role before. The overall assessment of the role is largely positive. 94% of students consider it

useful; approximately 85% (n=113) state that they might turn to the Buddies in the future. These quantitative data are confirmed and further explored in the analysis of the open-ended responses, which help us to articulate the meaning attributed to this usefulness. First, a procedural support function stands out, in which Buddies are perceived as useful resources for clarifying doubts, understanding how the university operates, and navigating institutional procedures and language. This mediating role is clearly evident in participants' responses, which emphasize the need to "better understand the information provided by the course" (Questionnaire 118) and to "understand how to navigate the university" (Q.95). This is accompanied by a second aspect, related to the experiential dimension of support, which values the possibility of "receiving practical advice based on their own experiences" (Q.77).

The theme of trust revolves primarily around the dimension of peer closeness. The responses suggest that Buddies are perceived as more accessible, fostering a relationship based on the sharing of experiences. This form of horizontal trust represents a distinctive element of the peer support model and helps explain the high willingness, as quantitatively observed, to turn to these figures even for an "exchange of information and advice" (Q.126). Students state that they are willing to turn to Buddies in case of need or for specific clarifications (Q.8, Q.40, Q.49, Q.73, Q.86, Q.92, Q.110, Q.124), positioning this figure as a resource to be activated in times of need rather than as a constant point of reference. However, this mode of use does not diminish their perceived relevance but rather defines their function within the academic experience.

The theme of the contribution to orientation emerges as an integrative area encompassing both cognitive and emotional aspects. Alongside informative and practical support, a dimension of emotional security emerges, which translates into a reduction in feelings of disorientation and an increase in confidence in one's academic path. The responses highlight how the presence of Buddies is perceived as "important for instilling confidence, especially in first-year students" (Q.125) and to avoid "feeling lost" (Q.49), contributing to a perception of the university environment as more welcoming and accessible. The frequent recurrence of expressions emphasizing the centrality of the role - such as "fundamental", "essential", and "very useful" (Q.57, Q.129, Q.6) - also suggests that students do not interpret the actions of Buddies as accessory, but as a significant and essential component in helping to reduce the sense of disorientation typical of the initial phase of the university experience, thereby facilitating adjustment (Q.29) and fostering a climate of greater security and trust.

The dimensions analyzed do not emerge as separate areas, but as interconnected elements of a peer support system, perceived as effective in addressing students' needs for orientation, integration, and guidance in a new context such as the academic environment.

6. Concluding Remarks and Limitations of the Study

The results show that students perceive the Buddy as a resource - an authoritative mediator capable of explaining the university system in accessible language precisely because of their own experience. Within this project framework, orientation is not intended merely as the transmission of information, but as a means of promoting growth and accessibility within the university community, supporting students in navigating the organizational, educational, bureaucratic, and social aspects of academic life. The “competent peers” envisaged by the project are perceived not as an alternative to institutional channels, but as a necessary complement to fill the relational void that often characterizes the school-to-university transition. The results of this study draw attention to the subjective dimension and the need for care during the transition, highlighting how the Buddy’s effectiveness lies in its ability to act as emotional and cognitive scaffolding. By reducing anxiety and a sense of disorientation, this figure thus enables incoming students to move from a position of passivity (as recipients of information) to one of proactivity (as conscious members of the institution). In conclusion, the research highlights how the POT Project has introduced, a potentially useful tool for redefining the orientation policies of the degree track, institutionalizing and confirming a function that was initially activated experimentally through the project.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of the study. First, the nature of the sample and the convenience sampling strategy make it difficult to generalize the work done within the degree program. Second, the exploratory nature of the analysis prioritizes a descriptive dimension that limits the possibilities for cross-analysis.

With the intention of transforming this experience into a new guidance policy, this study lays the groundwork for validating the model on a larger scale that overcomes these limitations.

Author Contributions:

This article is the result of a collaborative effort among the authors. M. De Santis drafted sections 1 and 6. A. Rosati was the local project coordinator and authored sections 2 and 3, while E. Renzi drafted sections 4 and 5, including the respective subsections.

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