



**Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference
of the Journal Scuola Democratica
REINVENTING EDUCATION**

VOLUME II

**Learning with New Technologies,
Equality and Inclusion**

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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Focus on the Future. An Orientation Project of the University of L'Aquila

Geraldina Roberti and Antonella Nuzzaci

University of L'Aquila, geraldina.roberti@univaq.it

University of L'Aquila, antonella.nuzzaci@univaq.it

ABSTRACT: *In today's society, informal learning patterns increasingly involve the use of creative tools that enable individuals to rapidly acquire new knowledge and skills. Since, in a constantly evolving context, it is mainly young people who are experimenting with ever-changing creative practices, it seems necessary that educational institutions also learn to speak the language of innovation (Shaheen, 2010), using original tools to dialogue with young people and making educational proposals accessible and comprehensible to them (Fabbris, 2009). In this perspective, this contribution aims to illustrate an orientation project carried out within the framework of the degree course in Education and Social Service Sciences at the University of L'Aquila and addressed to students of some Abruzzo high schools. In order to strengthen the collaboration between schools, universities and the working world, the researchers developed a two-steps cultural proposal, able to positively intervene on the students' reflection and construction of the educators and social workers profiles and their professional prefigurations. Within the framework of informal learning strategies, the project coordinators used innovative tools to allow the students to focus on tasks, objectives and methods of intervention related to the working environments in which the two professionals work. Specifically, the project included different moments of orientation, training and action, set in two different settings: school and university classrooms. By virtue of an articulated workshop course, which included simulations and role-plays, objectives and tasks relating to the professions in question were analyzed, using participative learning practices and heuristic and creative strategies to achieve the expected training outcomes.*

KEYWORDS: *Orientation, university, school, education, innovative practices.*

Formal and informal learning in guidance practices

Although the issue of the relationship between «formal-informal-non formal learning» is by no means a new question in educational and sociological studies, it has recently acquired a new configuration in the context of the processes of informed and conscious guidance by considering them no longer as separate categories, but as elements that merge and include each other.

In this contribution we will touch upon some of the general reasons for this renewed attention aimed, especially at analyzing the effects of the

interaction between formal and informal learning in the university and school context, developed following the implementation of the orientation activities foreseen in the POT-SUPER project entitled «Focus on the Future» carried out at the University of L'Aquila.

We therefore begin our analysis by briefly examining the character of the use of informality in orientation processes in relation to formality, focusing on the interconnection of local inter-institutional relations that have made the SUPER experience a special case in Abruzzo for the dynamics of informal practices in the formal.

In this «orientation/learning project» it was possible to focus on the formal/informal relationship, especially with regard to university choice, using the fact that «informal learning» is not a single process, but implies different types of learning, as well as the centrality/identity of the «learner».

This implies, however, careful planning and control of learning activities, which allows one to understand and measure what has been learned from experience. Choosing an educational pathway implies that the individual is able to elaborate a project of himself for a valid and productive insertion in society, in the world of work and professions, in the world of family responsibilities and relationships, in the world of culture and democratic life not only of his own country, but also of Europe and in perspective of the whole world (Pellerey, 1997, 49).

This also includes learning derived from engagement in some targeted activity, where one is vaguely aware that one is learning even if the prevailing focus remains on «conscious learning».

In many cases there are some elements of formality in informality, such as in supervised learning, which are aimed at promoting more conscious learning and the achievement of certain outcomes.

Similarly, in most formal learning situations, elements of informality appear, as in the cases of situated learning (Lave, Wenger, 1991) and application to specific life situations of the learners, especially on the level of reconciliation of new learning with individual experience, even when they are more or less unconscious, involuntary (Lave, 1992), unintentional or unplanned (Hager, Halliday, 2009, 172).

The danger of conceiving the different types of learning – formal/informal – as separate categories creates, above all in the field of guidance, quite a few difficulties, especially when it is not possible to make the most of the characteristics and previous experience of the student in order to increase positive thoughts about his choices and future.

It is therefore more correct to conceive of «formality» and «informality» as attributes present in all learning processes. The priority is to identify these attributes, explore their relationships, and identify their effects on students, teachers, and the learning environment (Colley et al., 2003).

In general, informal learning contexts are considered as a dimension involving different acquisition processes, which concern specific theoretical approaches.

On the basis of these approaches, within the Project, some informal practices were defined and characterized and a model of guidance and «informal counselling» was developed with reference to «reflection *in* and *on* action», which contributed to build the experience starting from the analysis of the concrete situations and needs of the learners in order to «govern indecision» thus avoiding to alter the context.

Understanding the guidance and mentoring strategies that underlie the emergence of informal practices in the development of precise forms of intervention in formal contexts means avoiding misunderstanding the nature of learning itself.

2. Orientation between formal and informal practices

Here the terms «formal» and «informal» are used to systematize and describe the multiple learning processes that can occur consciously or accidentally in various contexts with a view to continuous reinforcement between different actions and practices and be organized in very different ways within the orientation process.

However, the relationship between them is not always clear and explicit and does not always act in a seamless way, although its consolidation would instead enhance the process of awareness and recognition of the individual learner's experience, as a pathway to record the acquisition of the «gains» of individuals from the interaction of all types of learning in any environment.

It aims at making knowledge and skills visible so that they can combine and build behaviors and attitudes of different natures (Werquin, 2010) making them explicit and recognizable, also in terms of outcomes. There is a wide variety of procedures and approaches to recognition of guidance interventions on formal and informal learning with different objectives and responsibilities at different levels.

The success linked to formal integration models in which informal guidance practices are grafted is basically based on a few elements:

- the promotion of the students' initial level of interest and motivation;
- the quality of materials and tools able to support a high level of motivation of the students and to respond effectively to their expectations and needs;
- the construction of strategies and operational schemes able to provide students with institutional or inter-institutional support, which requires the use of informal/formal activities preceded by careful planning and followed by adequate execution and control that necessarily involves a multidisciplinary team composed of

experts from different areas and that play a significant role in addressing problems of «uncertainty in university choice» and in the use of integrated learning systems that aim at breaking down misperceptions or beliefs and that constitute the basic elements for the organisation of formal guidance programmes using informal elements.

The use of informal practices in a formal context is a promising approach to linking education to learners' choices and professional development, offering functional support linked to their life needs, as it seeks to maintain awareness for what they do and understanding of the most effective consequences through use of innovative tools to achieve goals.

Formal/informal integration in guidance offers more eclectic and multidisciplinary approaches with short term effects and long-term results, especially on decision making processes, enhancing the learners' experience and bringing it into the university experience and future life.

It cannot be denied that, based on several successful cases of their implementation, as well as on their ethical and technical foundations, informal practices and contexts within the formal can offer an answer to the search for alternatives and supports to solve the problems of guidance and tutoring.

The appreciation of different types of learning outcomes, e.g. through access options to education, within and between education pathways, through «facilitating systems», is such that it leads to a reduction in learning time and removes obstacles to the educational and professional success of learners.

The recognition and assessment of informally and formally acquired competences as well as the quality of practices and experiences in the field of guidance are often based on collectively agreed agreements, tools and strategies used to harmonize the training and employment system with procedures, analysis and profiling of cultural profiles.

The significance of competences acquired informally in the school system is also highlighted not least in the context of guidance processes and in apprenticeship activities in those who have to complete their training or in any initial and continuous phase of training. The relative recognition of students as non-passive recipients of training action calls for the ability to act on several levels, favoring forms of interaction and integration between different learning components, as well as between contexts and tools in order to make concrete the implementation of a «community of education at local level» which acts in continuity at training level.

Places, times, situations and relationships are therefore vital elements and unthinkable conditions for formal orientation with the support of informal practices. These elements will also be decisive for the form, content and not least the exchange and effect of the «conversations and dialogues» between the different actors. The close and direct connection to the experiences and events of the participants can create

unprecedented formal situations of guidance and counselling (Lave, 1988).

The distinctions between informal and formal practices in guidance should not be confused, however, with the «ability to cope with something», which normally refers to the type of action required to respond to the «choice» needs of the academic pathway and is linked to the concept of «appropriateness». The «appropriateness» of the orientation actions in entrance, *in itinere* and in exit are based on the degree of conformity/non-conformity and on the formal/informal actions with which small or big isolated problems can be faced. However, there are circumstances in which a «formal» action can help and support an «informal» action and vice versa with the intention of taking intermediate steps to reach a final goal.

In order to understand the dynamics of formal and informal practices at different levels in the processes of orientation adopted in the SUPER project, we introduce the concept of the use of informal practices in the formal in the orientation as a concept of «creative practice» that implies a deeper and broader understanding of the relationship between individual, training and professional culture. Framed in these terms, orientation recalls a social model of creativity understood as a dynamic system that connects people, institutions and domains of knowledge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Proponents of systems theories have held that creativity is the sum of many interacting parts of a system, including cultural and social aspects, such that creative ideas cannot be attributed to any single entity but are the result of the interaction of different elements (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1999).

Creativity comes from the interaction of systems and this underlines the importance of a community of practice that is aimed at supporting a creative orientation, which also highlights the importance of understanding what it means to promote and support a community of education at the local level.

The model of creativity in orientation practices is mainly based on the one hand, on the relationship between formally prescribed dimensions and those not formally prescribed (the orientation actions) and, on the other hand, on the positioning of different actors (university students, university tutors, students from schools in the area, teachers, school tutors, mentors, objective function figures, professionals, technicians, administrators, etc.). All of this in a variety of specific environments (corridors or classrooms, etc.) aimed at consolidating relations between the various figures involved in the process of supporting the student by highlighting his internal resources in order to put him in a position to make the most of the external ones.

3. The integrated guidance experience

The orientation experience and the University-School-Territory connection can also be traced back to all those activities of the POT-SUPER Project aimed at strengthening the understanding of the value of the choice of a university pathway, of professionalization and of individual and collective well-being, which reveals the need to clarify attitudes and perceptions with which the student approaches higher education and looks at his/her insertion in it. Conventional and non-conventional ways of organizing and implementing guidance practices facilitates the acquisition of transversal knowledge and skills that enable students to understand the recognition of, for example, regulated and non-regulated professions, conventional systems such as the use of CFUs, scientific-disciplinary fields, educational organization, etc.

However, since university course descriptions are defined by operational requirements and generally do not correspond exactly to the students' perceptive prefiguration of professional profiles and qualifications, it is necessary to identify tools to offer them concrete support to understand as closely as possible their own desires in order to put them in the best conditions to face the difficulties of initial insertion as well as those *in itinere* and of understanding the course and its spendability.

It is about guidance in the sense of preparing for the professional complexity of the future by raising learner participation and understanding of the value of different levels of professional qualification in different fields.

As is well known, formal recognition is regulated at a political level and goes hand in hand with rights for access to education and within the quality education system it acts as a broad context (Napper, 2010, 187-188), where the different guidance figures (teacher, tutor, assistant, mentor, school counsellor etc.) focus on strengthening the learner's internal resources, where formal and informal support differ in terms of levels of containment, confidentiality, roles and training contract.

This is generally defined through paths, objectives and contents, exams with which one usually receives a corresponding appreciation in the labour market, but also the autonomous, individual and social approach to study within an approach where all education becomes orientational (Domenici, 2009). The integrated orientation between informal practices in the informal fosters and recovers what Donald Schön (1983) describes as «reflection in action» to analyze in situation the real event in which the orientation requires limits and attention, thus promoting the well-being of the learning learner.

4. Practicing the university guidance

With a view to improving university choice guidance tools, it seems increasingly necessary to develop innovative strategies aimed at enhancing students' inclinations, while trying to identify their real potential¹. As De Feo and Pitzalis (2018) point out, choosing one's professional destiny means not only anticipating a relationship between an investment and a result, but also implies the ability to foresee the present and future symbolic meanings connected to a choice and its consequences, thus linked to the definition of self that one wants to build. Secondly, in view of the growing complexity of social scenarios, young people must be enabled to face the world of work with an adequate stock of skills, having learned, also through the chosen course of study, the fundamental characteristics of the profession they intend to exercise.

This is the main educational objective of the POT-SUPER project «Focus on the future», carried out by the University of L'Aquila's Degree Course in Education and Social Work Sciences. The project, which is part of the initiatives promoted by the Ministry of Universities and Scientific Research to encourage Italian high school students to choose a university course in a more informed manner², aimed to provide participants with an in-depth knowledge of the professions of educator and social worker, the two figures the course aims to outline. In order to strengthen the link between high school and university and to put in place truly effective policies to counteract the phenomena of early school leaving (Domenici, 2009), it seems increasingly necessary, in fact, to fill the orientation deficit of high school students with respect to the contents of the different courses of study, also encouraging a greater knowledge of university dynamics.

Several studies (see, among others, Burgalassi et al., 2016), have shown that a wrong assessment in the choice of university pathway is among the most frequent causes of student drop-out, showing how an

¹ «Student orientation [...] is an extensive notion involving various and at times opposing practices and devices that respond to diverging interests and incorporate the notions of guidance, orientation, consultancy, information, communication and commercial marketing» (De Feo, Pitzalis, 2017, 219). According to scholars, guidance processes, activities and events can be considered as «market devices».

² In November 2019, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research publishes the call «Plans for guidance and tutoring» to innovate and support orientation and tutoring actions of Italian universities. The Bachelor Degree Course in Education and Social Work Sciences of the University of L'Aquila took part in the call together with a network of 15 other universities led by the University of Siena, which proposed the project «Super-guidance and tutoring to promote academic and professional success». The project aims to carry out guidance and tutoring actions to support the professional prefigurations of students in an innovative perspective, far from traditional models. For more information, see Fabbri and Giampaolo (2021).

effective guidance activity is able to significantly reduce this kind of risk (Ishitani, Snider, 2004)³. In fact, in spite of the numerous reforms of our university system, Italy continues to be characterized by a relevant phenomenon of student drop-out and by a widespread irregularity of study paths (Triventi, Trivellato, 2015). In our country, the percentage of young people who drop out of university education is quite relevant and undoubtedly higher than the average recorded in the main European countries; as reported by EUROSTAT (2020), in 2018 the percentage of Italian young people aged between 18 and 24 years old who left the education and training system early (*early leavers from education and training*) was 14.5% – with a marked difference between men (16.5%) and women (12.3%) – compared to the average of the European Union countries of 10.5%. As is well known, the reasons behind the decision to drop out of school early are manifold and involve factors of a heterogeneous nature, which often end up being mutually reinforcing. Social, psychological and economic motivations seem to influence the phenomenon of early school leaving, leading scholars to search for interpretations able to identify the mix of factors that expose certain individuals more than others to the risk of dropping out (Colombo, 2010). As Besozzi (2006) points out, a central role is played by the student's family of origin; in social contexts that offer little support outside the family network, the cultural capital of parents often ends up influencing the goals and life projects of young people (often regardless of their personal vocations), highlighting a correlation between the family background and the life chances of the subjects.

In the light of these considerations, in order to promote a more conscious access of students to university, the coordinators of the POT-SUPER project at the University of L'Aquila developed a formative guidance programme able to widen the knowledge of the professional role and functions of educators and social workers, inserting this initiative within a wider reflection on the use of innovative and informal orientation practices⁴.

From an operational point of view, the project involved the students of four Abruzzo high schools (Domenico Cotugno High School in L'Aquila, Benedetto Croce High School in Avezzano, Marie Curie High School in Giulianova and Saffo High School in Roseto degli Abruzzi) and saw the participation of a total of 90 students enrolled in the 4th year and one teacher from each institute. The intervention plan was structured in two phases, the first of which was carried out directly in the schools and the second in the structures of the Department of Human Sciences of the University of L'Aquila.

³ «Drop-out was defined as students who either left their initial institution and never returned or left their initial institution but returned to the institution after a period of discontinuation in enrollment» (Ishitani, Snider, 2004, 7).

⁴ For a more detailed description of the project see Roberti, Nuzzaci (2021).

If the aim of the first step was to illustrate the basic contents of the degree course, underlining the characteristics of the professions of educator and social worker, the purpose of the next step was to build a shared path that would help young people to better understand the fields of action, the attitudes and skills needed by those who work in the social-educational and social-assistance services. To this end, thanks to the direct participation of two privileged witnesses working in the field as educator and social worker respectively, we tried to structure an innovative guidance path based on informal learning strategies. In fact, the project coordinators have chosen to bring innovative and informal educational practices into a formal setting such as the university, creating a participatory workshop that can bring out the real potential of the students involved and make them reflect independently on the information shared during the previous phase.

The choice of adopting a model able to balance formal and informal orientation actions in an innovative way proved to be one of the most rewarding elements of the whole project, because it stimulated the curiosity and interest of the students, allowing them to experience truly active and participative learning methods. As is also confirmed by the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning produced by the European Commission (2000), there are three basic categories of purposeful learning activity: 1) formal learning, which takes place in education and training institutions, leading to recognized diplomas and qualifications; 2) non-formal learning, which takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training and does not typically lead to formalized certificates; 3) informal learning, which is a natural complement to everyday life: since it is not necessarily intentional learning, it may well not be recognized even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills.

Partly in the light of these suggestions, the challenge of the POT-SUPER project of the University of L'Aquila was to find an innovative balance between formal and informal, bringing informal and innovative modes of action into formal contexts such as schools and universities.

5. The «Focus on the Future» Project

As we have pointed out, with a view to grafting informal and innovative educational and guidance practices (Werquin, 2010) within formal learning environments, the POT-SUPER project «Focus on the Future» aimed to go beyond the traditional forms of learning of knowledge, skills and competences, assessed and certified by educational institutions, to promote, instead, an approach to university guidance able to cultivate students' skills, making them experience forms of learning based on relationality and professional practices (Eraut, 2000). In fact, the proposed intervention aimed at transforming a formal «learning environment»,

configured as a physical place intentionally equipped (setting) to respond to educational needs, into an innovative space within which to set pedagogical strategies and informal didactic tools, so as to promote and support truly participatory learning processes.

To this end, the first phase of the project combined the presentation of the core contents of the degree course in Education and Social Work Sciences with the description of curricular life histories⁵ by five female graduates of the course, who were specially selected and trained to take part in the initiative as tutors. The direct and informal account of their university experience by the selected students was intended to reduce the emotional distance with the participants, encouraging the activation of processes of identification and involvement. As De Feo and Pitzalis (2018) have underlined, through the illustration of their academic career, the student tutors make it possible for high school students to project themselves into the future, acting as a sort of *cultural intermediary*⁶ able to bring them closer to the university reality in a concrete way. Tutors' participation also ensured that a more spontaneous and friendly atmosphere was created in the classroom, enabling the school students to formulate their own questions about the content presented to them in a more laid-back manner⁷. The final part of the meetings focused on the account of the internship experiences of the tutors, so as to begin to socialize the students with the actual working contexts in which the professional figures from the Degree Course in Education and Social Work Sciences can operate.

The second step of the project took place at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of L'Aquila, in order to build an invisible link between high school and university and to enhance the educational continuity of the guidance actions promoted. This phase envisaged the direct participation of two privileged witnesses, professionally engaged as an educator and social worker. The encounters had a strong laboratory character, in order to allow the students to interact directly with these figures and to better understand the fields of intervention, the attitudes and the skills needed by those who work in the social-educational and social-assistance services. During these activities we chose to favor a didactic approach based on participative learning methods, encouraging students to intervene and reflect independently on the information

⁵ Regarding the use of life histories Munro (1998, 8) writes: «the current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength». On this topic see also Zanfrini (1999).

⁶ For a first definition of the concept of cultural intermediaries see Bourdieu (1979). On this topic see also Solaroli (2004).

⁷ According to research carried out by Slack et al. (2014), prospective students accept comments made by senior students as truthful and representative because they come from students already enrolled in degree courses.

shared during the presentations. In order to encourage the active participation of the students and to promote informal interaction modes, the workshops included a series of role-plays and simulations, so that the students could confront themselves with the concrete working practices that the professional figures of educators and social workers are called to experience. The two experts' contribution made it possible to connect practical and theoretical knowledge, allowing the students to acquire direct insight into the activities and the main problems which characterize the two professions in their different operating contexts. In short, the activities carried out in this phase have facilitated the continuous comparison between school, university and the world of professions, which still seems to be lacking in the Italian educational contexts, stimulating forms of collaboration able to mitigate the condition of imbalance between labour demand and supply⁸.

Ultimately, the innovative choice of grafting informal practices and approaches onto highly formalized contexts represented a truly challenging experience both for the teachers involved in the project and for the students themselves, who were called upon to participate directly and creatively in the various activities proposed. In the light of the results achieved with this first experience, we can perhaps say that the challenge was won.

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⁸ As has emerged from numerous studies, the Italian educational context is still characterized by forms of skill mismatch, with negative consequences on the chances of young people entering the labour market quickly; for more in-depth analysis see Antonucci et al. (2014).

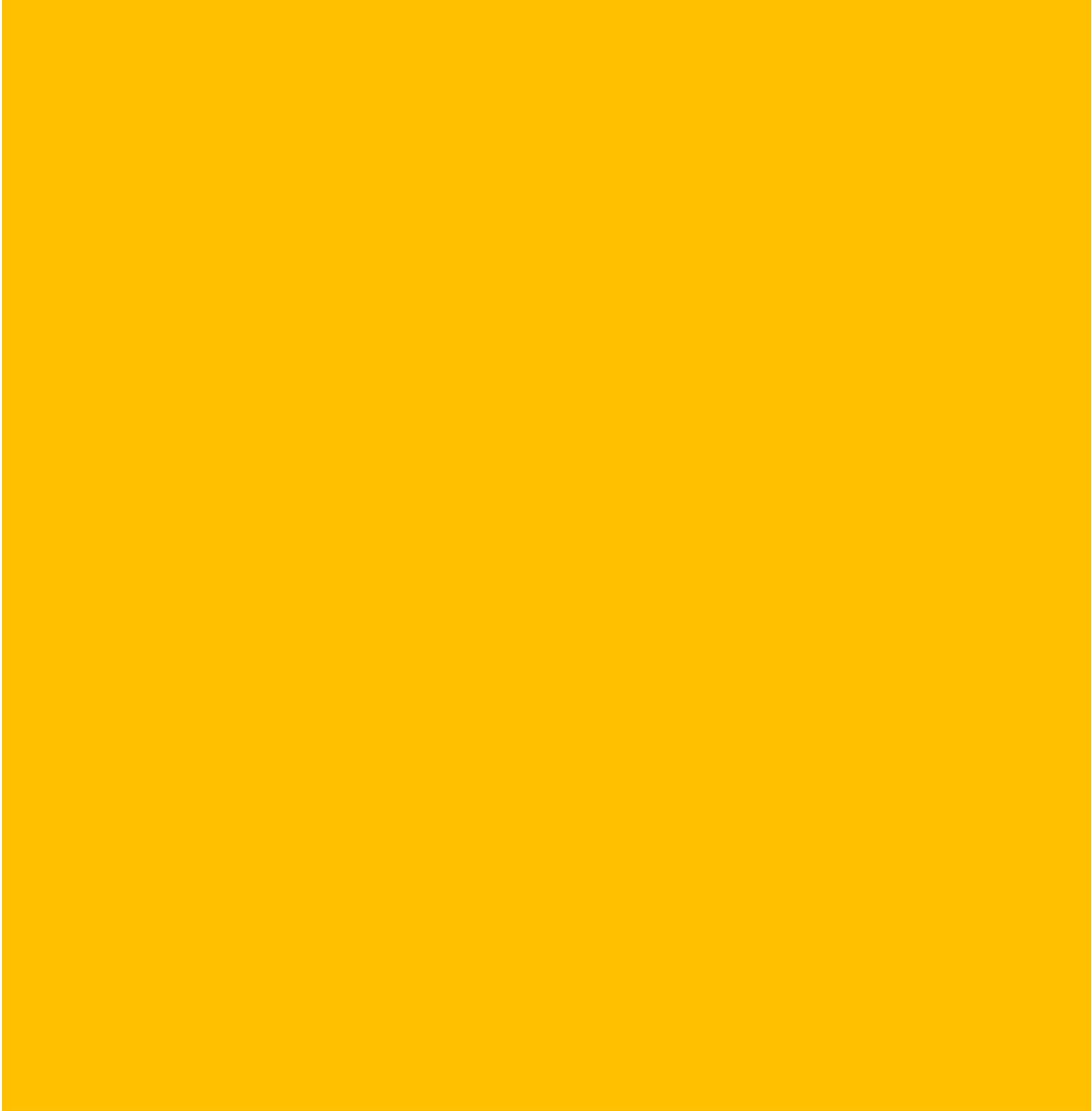
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