

# VOCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL COUNSELLING: A STRATEGY OF PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION DIRECTED TO YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN FROM THE INTERIOR OF THE PROVINCE OF BUENOS AIRES

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## **Abstract**

This work belongs to one of the activities that are carried out in the Vocational and Occupational Guidance Center (V.O.G.C.) of the Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences at the L.P.N.U.

In the year 1994 the Vocational/Occupational Guidance Programme for Municipalities was created, destined for work with adolescents who are attending their last year at secondary schools in the interior of the Province of Buenos Aires.

The Programme aims at fostering the development of spaces for reflection related to the educational/working projects of the adolescents who are close to entering university.

The proposal is based on the methodology of work groups, in the journeys preoccupations are sheared, the worries and fears experienced by the students are shared with their hosts, possibilities are used as ground for construction, dealing both with aspects of their current situation and their future possibilities.

From the analysis of the group productions collected throughout these years, we have developed a student's profile that - although it resembles the one obtained from local adolescents- adds new questions and points of view, thus increasing the complexity of the balance of forces related to the question of having to make a choice.

At the Vocational and Occupational Counselling Centre (C.O.V.O.) which is part of the Extension Area of La Plata National University, under the direction of Psyc. Mirta Gavilán, a number of Programmes have been implemented since the month of October, 1993, that have proved to be an answer to the needs and problems related to the sphere of Vocational and Occupational Counselling both at the local and provincial levels.

Vocational and Occupational Counselling constitutes a complex field that today has become decidedly interdisciplinary. It is basically a preventive activity, that promotes social and self- knowledge and helps the individual in the process of making his/her own life projects.

The abrupt and vertiginous changes that have taken place in society, bring about difficult and moving situations in which the young are faced by dramatic dilemmas.

The loss of certainty, the impact of technological advance, the new rules of the labour market and its policies, the spectre of unemployment and its consequences, produce deep anxiety and uneasiness.

This is the scenario envisaged by many young people from large urban centres, and this situation gets even worse for those who inhabit smaller and remote conglomerations as is the case of some districts in the interior of the Buenos Aires province.

Considering the number of difficulties and problems experienced by this age group, the multiple changes within the socio-economic and cultural context and the lack of counselling resources in the education system, the creation, as from 1994, of the Vocational and Occupational Counselling Programme for Municipalities was decided.

Since then, many agreements have been reached with different Municipalities, that make it possible to carry out a preventive task of direct intervention through Vocational and Occupational Counselling, covering a large number of people in the Buenos Aires Province.

The objective is to promote the opening of an environment for reflection on the educational-working project with special bearing on regional realities and to provide information about the different careers at tertiary and university levels, both public and private that make up the different disciplinary areas.

The programme is supported by the Team of Psychologist-Counsellors who carry out their academic activities and research in the Department of Vocational Counselling, and of Assistance and Extension in the Vocational and Occupational Counselling Centre.

This has been a very rewarding experience, not only for hundreds of young men and women who took part in the programme, but also for each and every member of the team. Faced with the need to focus on the problems of a large number of young people that were summoned to attend a two-day meeting of intense activity, the team restated and enhanced the working methods developed at the Vocational and Occupational Counselling Centre headquarters in La Plata. Consequently, these professionals undertook a training course in group work with the workshop modality. Through a process of permanent evaluation and reflection innumerable designs were reshaped, which were progressively adjusted so as to achieve the proposed goals.

Initially, the objective was a co-ordinated work, with the aim of having a non-participant observer that could place him/herself at an optimal distance and cast a critical look so as to be able to evaluate the tasks, correct some interventions and revise methodological aspects.

Even if the centre's proposal does not consider at the moment to carry out a complete vocational and occupational counselling, the opening of this service makes it possible to approach, in the form of group activity, some aspects related to the current situation and young people's expectations and possibilities with respect to the educative and labour fields, opening new ways to continue with the project.

This programme has summoned the presence and demand of hundreds of young men and women that approach the centre voluntarily with an expectant and committed attitude at each of the meetings.

The programme covered mainly the central and western areas of the province of Buenos Aires: Coronel Suarez, Rauch, Chascomús, 25 de Mayo, Chacabuco, Las Flores, Torquinst, Azul, bolívar, Cañuelas, Lincoln, América, Lobos, Necochea, etc. , were some of the Municipalities, to many of which we have returned year after year.

An average of one hundred students attend each meeting and in some cases, such as Bolívar and Chacabuco, almost two hundred were summoned and worked in concurrent workshops.

It is important to state that many of them keep in touch over the phone with members of the team at the centre, sometimes to ask for personal interviews, to communicate that they have made up their minds or to tell us which profession they have chosen, especially those who will further their studies at the National University of La Plata.

This communication is part of the proposal and the door is left open by the team of counsellors for further consultation at the end of the meetings.

On many occasions, the resident centres organized visits to tour the U.N.L.P. faculties and, again, the Counselling Centre participates offering the students oriented information (1).

The proposal includes two full-day work meetings (morning and afternoon).

It comprises three kinds of approach:

1. A workshop with students
2. Meeting with parents
3. Meeting with teachers

The methodology is that of workshop activities (2) with 30- up to 40- member groups coordinated by one of the team psychologists.

The information sources we work with consist of Study Guides, monographs by professionals, graphic and audio-visual material, information software and interviews to professionals.

A meeting with parents is organized; the invitations are issued to the participants at the end of the first meeting. Its main objective is to offer the family a place where to express their doubts, worries, fears, and to discuss ways of helping their children during this process.

The meeting with teachers aims to analyse the role they play at this stage in the lives of their students and enable counsellors to collect meaningful information to be taken into account regarding the participant groups.

### **Young people's expectations regarding the task ahead**

In general, young people think they are going to find in this space-time of the meetings the recipe as to what "to do".

When we first turn up at a municipality, there is a circulating idea that this is all about a "course", i.e. two days of classes, where a psychologist will tell them what is convenient for them to do (this representation of our work has not been fully investigated so we could not ascertain if this is related somehow with the way the organizers spread the proposal, but for some reason it is part of the students', parents' and teachers' imaginary); this is why, this is one of the first knots (3) that have to be worked out and undone in the workshop practice.

The first moments and the first hours of the meeting are foundational for group events and dynamics, since, if conditions of respect and confidence are achieved, it is possible to attain a true compromise with the task.

It is interesting to listen to teenagers when the time for evaluation of the workshop comes, when in an environment of greater confidence, they can recuperate their initial expectations and integrate them to those developed during the meetings up to their conclusion. "I thought we were going to see all about careers, but I enjoyed thinking of other things because that helped me think about what I wanted"..., a paradigmatic phrase that gives us a taste of what is expressed at these meetings.

During the first hours at the meeting, expectations, anxieties and needs with respect to the future are stated; the resulting subjects are then analysed in terms of their demand and the indicators of a first diagnosis approximation are identified, related to the degree of implication of the group with the selected problem.

Voices insist on expressing doubts, fears and interrogations that are enunciated according to differences and peculiarities of each member of the group. Despite this, the subjects deal with questions that interpellate, mobilize and give new meaning to identifying schemes that have been built and that are updated constantly in the life of an adolescent

today. These interrogations translate into questions that open up the problem at the same time focalize it.

What can I do? What can I be? Who do I want to be? How can achieve my life expectations? Will I be capable of achieving this? How?

Although in this repertoire of questions characteristic of a situation of choice, the most frequent query is: What shall I do? This is not only a vocational question, as something that can always be heard due to indecision: "I don't know what to study", "I want to discover my true vocation", "I don't know what I may be good at? "What shall I do" sounds more like "What shall I do... (despite the fact that I can make a choice), or like "What Shall I do...(if I have no options and I have to think about getting a job).

The moment a profession mentioned, the immediate question is: are there any openings for graduates? What can you do with this degree? There has been a shifting from vocational interests to occupational interests, a phenomenon that was not as strong a few years ago.

Up to now explicit or not so explicit, conscious or not so conscious, questions are not much different from those asked by most young men and women in our region, those who attend urban schools or from the periphery which are close to large centres of education, whose economic possibilities, though more meagre by the day, do not obliterate (not too much) their fantasies and desires for further studies.

This is the case of young men and women from the interior of the province of Buenos Aires, who, though living under circumstances similar to ours, pose themselves more questions thus increasing the complexity of the matrix of tensions characteristic of a situation of choice.

To the antinomian pairs like/dislike, interest/disinterest, love/hate, pleasure/displeasure, present/future, the following pairs must be added: near/far, easy/difficult, success/failure, possible/impossible.

In order to make these tensions visible, it is unavoidable to dedicate a lot of working time, though generally insufficient, to these questions, to let the group explicit them, discuss and reflect on them. These are expressed under the guise of preoccupations, fears, anxieties in every production of group interplay (4).

- to leave home, city, town, neighbourhood;
- to go away from the people one loves, family, relatives, childhood friends;
- not being able to meet daily one's schoolmates;
- not to have enough money, one's own or from family;
- to feel a great responsibility for the economic efforts that parents must do;

- fear of making mistakes and of having to return home empty-handed;
- fear of failure;
- fear of feeling alone;
- fear of not being able to study what they want;
- not being able to study because of scarcity of resources;
- to have to stay home without knowing what to do, devoid of projects, without a future.

Finally, to make up one's mind to study away from home means solving problems and elaborating a series of questions in which living expenses and lodging costs are only minor issues. The worries about adapting oneself to and living with other people in an unknown and mostly hostile world.

Certainly, it is not an easy task to listen to students and intervene in these cases. Though everybody knows what people from the interior of the province are suffering, we see it and hear about it in the media, we read about it in the newspapers, we have studied this problem and many times even analysed it. To listen to these personal stories is a hard task.

To create the conditions for these stories to be told to the group, to make what is strictly personal a collective interest, to put into words what one feels, to enunciate and at the same time to be listened to, to share, to be accepted, recognized, rejected, discussed and contextualized, amplified and to be seen under a new light, makes it possible at least to – and this is not a small success – as Foucault himself said: “... *to think of one's problems in a different way...*” (5) and after all this is all that can be done.

Group work makes it possible to share worries, exchange fears and construct possibilities; a legitimization of discourse takes place and of the feelings of each participant. The adult (here it is the counsellor dressed up as adult) breaks the ice and fosters dialogue; he makes it possible to start the dialogue and encourages them to talk about things they do not normally talk about because it hurts, for even if at home there are signals that anticipate some change, some things are said, some subjects are touched, but in most cases not everything is said, there is always something that is not discussed.

We first attempt to make them express themselves, their personal views, and it is here that lies the richness provided by group work. The worth of group work has been confirmed by experience in all these years as the most adequate methodology for work in the field of Counselling applied to large groups.

Because it has been conceived as a place for collective construction, each moment at the meetings has a particular richness related to personal and group production. It allows the

construction of the conception of knowledge as a means, as a way. Not as finished, definitive, immutable knowledge as neither are the feelings, learning, possibilities and decisions over what to do when you are a teenager.

This modality of work is considered a preventive intervention strategy which can be construed as: “the capacity of humans and their social groups to anticipate, with different strategies, situations that could mean different sorts of damage, thus making it possible to create and/or reinforce their cognition, attitudes and values that will help them avoid or minimize this damage (6).

A space and time for interchange, the Vocational Orientation workshops leave their landmarks in the interior of the Buenos Aires Province...

The following are passages from a letter sent to us by Raquel, an adolescent who took part in our programme at the locality of 25 de Mayo, last year. When she learned we were back, she asked one of her classmates to take the letter to the school in which the meetings took place, as she was at the time working in a shop. She said:

*“Hello! In this envelope is enclosed my life’s most cherished moment .....”(it was a photo showing the moment when the principal of her school is giving her high school diploma) ...and I want you to keep it because you were very important persons to me....I have thought a lot about our work at the meetings and especially when I graduated because I wanted to study to become a lawyer, but I had a few exams to take and my parents did not accept to pay for my studies, but I kept on fighting, I took the exams, I got a job and sat for my last examination on my own, and when I did not know what to do next as I wanted to go to the university, I phoned ... now that I know you are there, I will go one of these days to La Plata to have a talk with you. I have to say good-bye now but I hope you will be able to help other boys and girls, by giving them new strength as you did to me”.*

### **Some conclusions regarding the work that has been done**

Work at the Municipalities has made it possible to carry out an analysis and characterization of young men and women groups faced with a situation in which they have to make a choice in the interior of the Province.

1. They are “free” to make an autonomous decision; they can make decisions regarding the kind of profession, and can choose the place to study them. They leave their home town. Generally they go to the University of La Plata or to the University of Buenos Aires (Federal Capital), where they can meet their brothers or friends who are already studying in one of these universities. They belong to middle- class families and their parents may be either professionals who have also studied in one of these centres, businessmen, or

landowners. These students are self-confident and want to leave their towns. Within this group are included those who want to go back as professionals to their hometowns and who choose professions oriented towards regional activities, this being the prevailing criterion for making a choice.

2. They can choose within a narrow range of possibilities, in general they choose professions that can be done at the extension seats of the different universities in the interior of the Buenos Aires Province. These are those adolescents who can not yet break up their ties with “family” definitively (the “family would also object to this for the moment), they have good self-esteem, and cherish the hope that after studying a couple of years at or not far from home, to be able to gain confidence in their chosen profession, they will be able to attend one of the main universities to finish their studies.

3. They come to the meetings, influenced by their peers (all my classmates are going there; I will go too). They have no chance to make a choice and must try to get a job and do a tertiary study offered by the reality of their home town. This is most frequent in the women group. The only option left is to do courses at Teacher Training Institutes. On the other hand, the young men’s option is to get a job. This group is made up of sons and daughters of impoverished families, with scarce economic means. Parents have precarious jobs, many times they are just farm labourers, and they have no formal schooling. Cultural gaps and low self-esteem are apparent. Many of these families have already made a great effort for the children to be able to settle in a town in which there is a secondary school.

Finally, in order to elaborate an “entrant’s profile”, taking into account the anxieties and worries that come up during the meetings, it can be seen that differences with respect to high school are related to the interest the students will have in the subjects they will study according to the profession they choose: “high school is boring”, “we are taught very little”, “many subjects are dull”, “during the last year we did almost nothing”. These expressions show the loss of interest in high school level studies felt by students. This is not felt quite the same by students who attend technical schools, and who moreover have to dedicate a lot more time to study, to organize better, to make time last longer, and be much more constant. This in turn generates fears, because they are not used to good study practices, study methods, reading and writing, reading long textbooks and to the difficulties related to having to sit for exams.

Space and time for interchange, the Vocational Orientation workshops leave their landmarks in the province of Buenos Aires ...

*"I liked learning that many teenagers of my own age felt the same way as I did. Also to learn about some important aspects of the profession I have chosen. I loved the way we worked together".* Silvana from Chacabuco.

*"I liked the course, not only because of what I thought, but also for what we did at the meetings".* Ana from Chascomús.

*"I believe that, thanks to this workshop I have been able to choose my true vocation; I hope I have not made a mistake and that when I graduate there will be openings for me".* Hugo from Azul.

*"It was useful for doing away with some fears we felt that prevented us from choosing our true destinies. The most important task is the one you do whole-heartedly".* Luciana y Valle from Coronel Suárez.

*"Fight as though you were to live forever, live as though you were to die tomorrow. We loved the course. Thanks for all you gave us".* Ana, Pato, Dani and Meli from America.

*"This two-day workshop was very beautiful, and helped me to think about lots of things and I got lots of useful information...Thanks! ....P.S. When I get my lawyer or designer degree, I'll pay you a visit and let you have a look at it. ".* The writer is Raquel, at the closing of the workshop in which she took part... (the student who sent us the letter). From 25 de Mayo.

## **Notes**

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