

GUIDANCE AND TRAINING PROGRAM FOR LABOR INSERTION(*)

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to account for intervention experiences in labor and occupational guidance. The School of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires, has been carrying out these experiences in secondary schools in the Avellaneda district since 1990. Our task approaches teaching and extramural activities, as well as research in the last years, from an action-research viewpoint.

From our perspective, to approach school-work transition situations acquires a particular significance in the current employment state of affairs in Argentina.

In a restrictive context and being affected by their own adolescent vital crisis, youth find it difficult to build their life projects and to find their own way at educational and labor levels. Transitions turn out to be longer and more complex in a context which combines structural unemployment and precarious employment conditions. Youth are one of the most affected sectors. IN DEC (*Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos*, its Spanish acronym) figures indicate that the unemployment rate for young people ranging between 15 and 24 years of age in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area is 34.2%. (May 1995).

On the other hand, the results of our research show a rising concern among young people as regards their labor insertion. This insertion becomes an essential support to develop their life projects, including the educational ones.

There is a striking contrast between this present situation and the focuses of interest expressed by students at the beginning of the 90s, closely related to the design of educational projects as far as their vocation was concerned. Nowadays, the growing uncertainties become manifest in the difficulty of getting a job allowing them to transfer the knowledge they acquired both formally and informally.

Likewise, youth's perspectives are also increasingly limited if their family situation is to be taken into account. In many cases their own projects include employment as a way of providing resources for their households.

Education as a means of social mobility and employment stability have reached crisis point. At present, uncertainty is the dominant feature in the socio-labor panorama. For

adults, the rules of the game have changed along the way; however, for youth, everything becomes uncertain from onset. The identities and representations about employment shatter affecting people's lives from a psychosocial level. Unemployment is no longer temporary. It entails the reproduction of a closed circle connecting unemployment, poverty and marginality. In this way people are kept outside and without any possibilities of returning to the circuit of production, consumption and social acknowledgment. (Castel, 1995).

To understand the structural factors that shape the above mentioned scenario, a reflective reading of the psychosocial implications for people is also required. In this respect, the contributions of investigation results made by Jahoda (1987) are revealing. Jahoda acknowledges the following psychological problems caused by unemployment: 1) loss of a habitual temporal structure; 2) a feeling of lack of objectives and lack of participation in social goals; 3) social contact restriction; 4) loss of identity and status; 5) lack of a regular activity.

In reference to juvenile unemployment, the author points out the following psychosocial consequences: lack of hope in the future and lack of ambitions, expectations and plans; inactivity, apathy and boredom; loss of self-confidence; abandon the search for a position and a diffused hostility against the community. The guiding principles and the ambitions learned through family and school socialization gradually cease to exist. Thus, youth seem to be a population that is more and more at risk and which should be assigned top priority both in research and social policies.

As Castel (1995) defines it, poverty translates into a disaffiliation zone by not being integrated via employment and by not being inserted in a nearby network of protection. According to this author the stable condition of vulnerability situations (an intermediate situation between integration and disaffiliation) was, until the 70s, the characteristic of that time. Thus, marginality was a residual factor in the globally integrated social formation. In central countries this vulnerability was compensated by assured State social assistance. Today, the situation has dramatically changed: disaffiliation is the predominant tendency and marginality, an increasingly structural factor.

In this context, we have confirmed –in the school population of state-run high schools of the Avellaneda district participating in the Guidance and Training Program for Labor Insertion– a situation of growing impoverishment among parents, many of them reported unemployed. On the other hand, those young people who manage to get a job, do so under highly precarious conditions. In this way we are faced with a population which is going through a vulnerability situation particularly affecting their possibilities of building life projects.

This adolescent population develops part of their social life within the school context, which becomes an essential social network. However, said context does not provide any room for reflection and systematic learning on the schoolwork transition and the socio-labor insertion. Not even the social and technical employment reality is specifically analyzed.

There is an important gap between the needs of the population on the verge of entering the world of labor and the acquisition of information and experiences that make personal resources available for the development of strategies that shall enable actions to be directed towards labor insertion.

Interventions to direct and assist labor insertion from school have a preventive value involving the comprehensive development and health of youth. Vocational and labor guidance aims at giving a new meaning to personal resources and technical abilities young people have, while strengthening their potential and supporting the construction of strategies so as to achieve their goals.

Taking into account this approach, a Guidance and Training Program for Labor Insertion (POCIL, its acronym in Spanish) has been implemented. The chair of Vocational and Occupational Guidance is in charge of said program, as part of the activities planned by the University Extramural Secretariat of the School of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires.

Guidance and Training Program for Labor Insertion

1) Background information

The program of Vocational-Occupational Guidance Workshops developed by the Chair of Vocational-Occupational Guidance in state-run schools of the Avellaneda district between 1990 and 1994, is framed within the Program of Social Epidemiology and Community Psychology of the School of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires. The working model the Program used finds its antecedent in the technical assistance (counseling and provision of resources) provided to the Employment Department, Undersecretariat for Youth of the Municipality of Buenos Aires, within the context of the Program *Empleo Joven* (Employment for Youth) of the Undersecretariat and the ILO (1989).

The POCIL has been implemented as from 1995 in state-run high schools of the Avellaneda district. Forty-seven workshops have been carried out so far, with a total participation of 2,434 students between 17 and 18 years of age (85.5%).

2) Objectives

The general objective of the Program is to widen the personal and educational possibilities of youth receiving schooling in order to find a position in the world of labor.

The *specific objectives* are the following:

- a) To help identify personal interests and resources, their expectations and their personal project for the future.
- b) To explore representations about employment and reflect on the meaning they have for each person.
- c) To produce and transmit knowledge about the characteristics of labor market, the sources of information about labor demand, and the required instrumental resources.
- d) To help develop strategies for active job search.
- e) To stimulate the appraisal of personal and labor experience.
- f) To help identify the areas which need training and to motivate active search for them.
- g) To prevent risk situations, thus enabling the elaboration of experiences (positive and negative ones) related to the world of labor.
- h) To evaluate the effectiveness of the performed actions.

3) Methodology

Reflection workshops are used by the program. The methodology is group work. This approach offers favorable conditions for reflection and peer interchange, this facilitating the production and incorporation of new knowledge, and fostering a change of attitude both at personal and group levels.

The program includes two consecutive weekly workshops (two hours and a half each) carried out at school premises. The topics dealt with in each workshop are different.

What follows is a description of the implemented model that includes several techniques: discussion groups, role-playing, dramatization, the reading of job adverts, the layout of a curriculum vitae and a covering letter. This method combines work in large and small reflection groups.

First module: The significance of employment for youth, searching for employment.

- By means of a group construction and participation methodology, participants reflect about the significance of employment for youth.
- Based on the participants' previous experiences and their representations, the idea is to reflect on the significance of employment for the group and for each individual. Sharing their work experiences turns out to be useful for reviewing their own experiences and becomes a source of information for those who have not inserted themselves in the world of labor yet.
- From the experience shared, participants work on different ways to obtain a job: formal and informal networks. Likewise, different attitudes towards searching are identified.

- An exercise in which job adverts are read and analyzed is carried out so as to develop comprehensive and critical reading of them. Should doubts appear, they are also clarified at this stage.
- An attempt is made to identify personal and instrumental resources as well as personal and contextual obstacles for labor insertion.
- Subsequently the knowledge youth have of their rights and duties in the world of labor are also analyzed. Participants reflect on the labor conditions for youth and also make contributions about their own work experiences which are processed by the group and by themselves.
- The workshop ends with a dramatization. A first job interview is staged in which there is a mention to a job advert whose terms are not clear enough. The purpose of this exercise is for youth to express and assign meaning to their representations about work and also to express their fears. There follows a reflection about the group production, this enabling the participants to reflect on their own situation in perspective.

Second module: Instrumental aspects; requirements for job search and skills needed for that purpose.

- Specific knowledge is provided and through collective production, in small groups, a covering letter and a curriculum vitae are elaborated. In a second stage, during a plenary session, a common presentation of each group production is performed, doubts are clarified and all the necessary recommendations are given.
- Finally a job interview is staged. The interviewer takes a curriculum vitae written by one of the groups as a referent. The objective is to analyze the interview situation in detail and enable learning, with a view to strengthening youth's personal resources, so as to be better equipped to face assessment situations defining their labor insertion.

Workshop evaluation: During the development of the activities, two questionnaires are distributed, at the beginning and at the end. The objectives are to inquire about the projects and representations youth construct on employment; to identify resources and obstacles they acknowledge for insertion and to evaluate possible changes based on the new learning.

4) Results

Next, some of the results arisen from the workshops and the application of questionnaires will be presented.

During 1995 and 1996, it has been found that 75% of young people plan to study and

work. In 1995, 15% of the population surveyed had a job. In 1996, the percentage reached 16.5%. This information coincides with the results of investigations that are being developed within the chair Vocational-Occupational Guidance (1).

We found that at the beginning of the workshops many young people who work with their families, neighbors or close relations to the family, do not assign to the activity they carry out the category of labor experience.

The features about the world of labor that young people highlight are:

- It is restricted in its capacity for reception of youth's demands
- It offers few opportunities for education
- It is demanding as regards requisites: specific competence, skills and knowledge, experience; likewise, about the socialization required in labor: to be agreeable, respectful of hierarchy, have the capacity to join work teams, be flexible to carry out different tasks.
- It offers low pay.
- The ways of hiring have become "flexible" (contract on trial, probationary period) and may conceal abuse or exploitation.

As regards the type of work that the surveyed population carries out, the following features were observed:

- They carry out simple service tasks that they have partly learnt during their training and partly in the actual performance of work.
- The first job is appreciated as a learning source, an experience.
- The number of hours devoted to work is not exclusive and is subject to studies, which are considered a priority.
- The performance of this sort of job is considered to be temporary and as a means to get experience and economic resources to afford other projects (studies, family support, personal independence). They hardly think of the possibility of being promoted from the position they hold.

As to how these jobs are obtained, it is mainly informally. Only 4% got a job by means of job adverts and employment agencies. 74.2% got them from relatives, neighbors and/or friends, what proves that the community resource is still a valid and suitable answer in highly restrictive and critical situations.

These jobs are positively regarded and valued by the youth, despite the modes of hiring and precarious conditions, because of the opportunities they offer them to gain experience, develop their autonomy and self-confidence. The relationship with the employer may be accompanied by some affection or family bond (friend, neighbor, relative).

With regard to the representation and the recognition youth have of their own resources for their insertion into the world of labor, the results obtained from the surveyed population show that 93% of them think that they have the resources to start working. The resources which are more often acknowledged are: the "desire to work", "high school degree" and "ability to establish relationships".

As for the representation youth have of the obstacles they find when seeking a position 92% think that there exist difficulties. The *lack of work*, *lack of experience* and *lack of training* are the ones more frequently mentioned.

The young people who were not working at the moment the survey was carried out pointed that *lack of experience* was the main obstacle to find a job.

Conclusions

Apart from structural unemployment youth consider that lack of experience and of skill are also obstacles to get a job, and relate the latter to their complaints against school. The lack of training hinders their chances to get a job. Therefore, they are more prone to get precarious jobs.

The shifting of the focus of interest of teenagers towards the issue of work introduces questions to be considered from the intervention practice. If "vocation" used to guide an educational tendency, today the access to a job supports that possibility. Young people place the issue of labor insertion in the limelight. This has of late been constantly noticed in all guidance workshops and was the framework from which the Guidance and Training Program for Labor Insertion in schools was settled.

Today, the problem of the transition school-world of labor is closely linked to the need to get a job. In this context, the educational tendencies as well as other personal projects will be possible with the access to a job.

In the intervention practice our objective has two interests:

- 1) To contribute, within the framework of a collective work and participation project, to the reconsideration and awareness on the part of youth of the personal resources and skills they are endowed with. Likewise, the actions aim at assigning meaning to the representations of the world of labor, thinking over those obstacles that in many cases prevent, from the very beginning, the opportunity to handle strategies to search for and maintain a job.
- 2) To provide information and instrumental resources that will foster a better personal position for the search and social-labor insertion.

Both objectives are interrelated and combine the reflective attitude and the awareness of their own situation, with the necessary instrumental resources to develop personal strategies and projects.

This does not imply denying the high degree of restrictions for youth or state the need of an "adjustment" on the part of the actors to the present-day requirements of the labor market. There is an attempt to enhance an active and free reflective attitude in order to strengthen the resources young people are endowed with. To do so, it is necessary to assign new significance to their personal, family and school background, so that they can strengthen their resources and create transforming projects for themselves and those around them.

Through our action the interest is also focused on the setting of debate at school level, as it is one of the privileged environments for youth to socialize. We are trying to lay the foundations for the creation of spaces for more systematic reflection at school, articulated from the curriculum. In this sense, the challenge goes in for transferring these experiences to geographical areas of greater risk.

Notes

(*). Paper presented in the *Primer Congreso Internacional. Pobres y Pobreza en la Sociedad Argentina*. CEIU UNQUI, 1997.

1. a) Initiation Scholarship: "Jóvenes, el significado del trabajo frente a situaciones de cambio" Secyt UBA 1995/1997 b) Investigation Project UBACYT 1994/1997 (PSO13) "Orientación Vocacional: Proyecto de vida, adquisición de recursos personales y trabajo"; c) Survey to 400 people between 17 and 18 years old within the 5ta. Feria de las oportunidades educativas y laborales de Avellaneda.

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