

## **AUTONOMY IN STUDENTS ATTENDING LAST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOLS: A study about guidance activities performed**

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### **Abstract**

The ending of high school raises, in students of last year, questions about what to do once they finished school. The wide variety of possible paths to choose, places youth at a crossroads that inevitably involves making decisions about the future. Vocational guidance can accompany young people and help them to identify what path to start and to consider the reasons for their choice. In this sense, guidance is currently conceived as a process that contributes to build a life project, setting goals, planning and developing strategies for it. One of the objectives of Psychology of Orientation, at present, is favor the construction of life, educational and job projects, being one of the objectives, the group approach (Aisenso, 2007).

Year after year, the Dirección Técnica Programa Orientación al Estudiante (DOE) – Subsecretaría de Coordinación Académica, Secretaría de Asuntos Académicos, Universidad de Buenos Aires - develops orientation groups destined to students of the last year of high school, that come from public or private educational establishments in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, the outskirts of the city and other places all over Argentina, who approach the DOE in a personal and spontaneous manner demanding vocational guidance. Our objectives are describe sociodemographic profile of young people consultants of vocational guidance group developed in DOE, present activities of vocational guidance done before their participation in the groups from the perspective of adolescent autonomy and analyse group device appraisal in the setting up of study and work project.

**Key words:** guidance, group approach, high schools, autonomy.

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## Introduction

The ending of high school raises, in students, questions about what to do once they finished school. The wide variety of possible paths to choose, places youth at a crossroads that inevitably involves making decisions about the future. Vocational guidance can accompany young people and help them to identify what path to start and to consider the reasons for their choice. In this sense, guidance is currently considered as a process that contributes to build a life project, setting goals, planning and developing strategies for it.

This current approach, based on the development of the Psychology of Orientation, considers that the objective is to subserve in people the construction of the identity of their educational, work and life projects, in a context of permanent change. From this perspective, it addresses issues linked to the different transitions of people throughout the life cycle (Guichard and Huteau, 2001), and not only concerned to problems young people have in their choices related with the transition from school to studies and / or work (Aisenso, 2007).

These transitions occur in the interaction of people with the context, that imposes certain rites of passage or that may lead to the construction of new roles, where people are still active in the impact of these modifications. In any case, although youth is not the only critical turn in life, this stage does offer certain characteristics that places it in a central role in the framework of Psychology of Orientation. The passages of youth are especially valuable as long as they inaugurate new social fields with meaningful temporary marks (Urresti, 2008).

In this process of construction of work and educational projects at the end of high school - as a milestone in the development of trajectories - is of fundamental importance to consider several aspects involved in the decision, such as the factors that affect the choices, like information, personal and social resources, and possible obstacles, as well as the identification of interests and their relationship with the job field and the different possibilities of training.

To carry out the projects will not reach with the young people to state their expectations and intentions; but will require the anticipation of a well-designed goal; identify the resources that will be needed to get it going; to plan in an orderly way the phases or stages that will have to be go through, and to impose as an obligation the fact of reaching it (Rodríguez Moreno, 2011). Thus, young people will exercise their autonomy, also walking an individual path, in pursuit of their goal. This way implies that they assume an active position, choosing and carrying out different activities directed to the concretion of the project of study and work.

Some authors distinguish three dimensions that make up the concept of autonomy: attitudinal or cognitive autonomy, functional or behavioral autonomy and emotional autonomy. The first refers to the ability to identify options, make decisions and define one's goals. It is linked to confidence in one's abilities, personal goals, desires and preferences. Functional or behavioral autonomy incorporates regulatory processes such as the perception of competencies, which means, the perception young people have about the strategies available to reach a goal, and the perception of control, associated with the ability to choose a specific strategy which results sufficiently effective to be successful. Finally, emotional autonomy refers to the perception of emotional independence regarding parents and peers, who exert some pressure on the adolescent to satisfy the expectations of others, and it is also related to the feeling of confidence towards the own choices and goals, social independence and with the removal of peer pressure (Noom, Dekovik & Meeus, 2001).

Although the construction of a life project depends on the different possibilities of identification young people have, the concept of autonomy implies a distance or separation that cannot be thought without the interaction with others. In the exchange the unique stories are expressed, as well as the intentions they have regarding the future. Promoting the reflection on these issues with those who share the same situation helps the construction of strategies to implement in order to overcome an obstacle in relation to the future, from different perspectives.

Year after year, the Dirección Técnica Programa Orientación al Estudiante (DOE) – depending of Subsecretaría de Coordinación Académica, Secretaría de Asuntos Académicos, Universidad de Buenos Aires, (UBA)- develops guidance groups addressed to students of the last year of high school, that come from public or private educational establishments in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA), the outskirts of the city and other places all over Argentina. All of them approach the DOE in a personal and spontaneous manner demanding vocational guidance.

The aim of a group processes is to encourage, through reflection and information, the construction of personal projects of study and work and the strategies to develop them. Among the covered topics, the device promotes the recognition of personal interests and their relationship with the areas of the job field, the identification of personal resources and possible obstacles to face, the factors involved in decision making and the transition to high school - university / job field. Besides, it intend to promote the development of strategies that encourage the active search for information on higher education and professions, expanding knowledge about studies in the University and Higher Education, as well as on

the job field. Young people attend groups with information obtained from different sources such as visiting educational institutions, talking with relatives, friends, teachers and others. The main task to be done in a guidance group consists of thinking about oneself and the context, including the information on the different options to study.

The value acquired by the peer group in the formation of the adolescent is known and indisputable, since it is the area of socialization privileged by them in their development and construction of their identity. The group as a habitat conducive to the task, natural for the adolescent, helps to reduce anxieties and face their own difficulties. It is in the dialogue between the young people that the best help arises. The group offers itself as mediator between the individual and the social. The possibilities of facing and solving problems are enriched. Also, as a result of interaction and communication, changes in the behavior of individuals are fostered through the performance of activities that favor the assumption of commitments and responsibilities regarding the study and their own future, and the appropriation of diverse symbolic tools. (Santoyo, 1981, Aisenso, 2007)

Group conformation is not just some young people gathered in an auditorium. The fact that participants meet in the same space, raise similar issues of concern and introduce the first starting points of their intention to make decisions about their future concerning education and work gives them the possibility to become a group.

A group can be considered as a set of people that share an internal representation, a task and a common goal. In the group interactions are produced, involving mechanisms of assumption and awarding of roles (Pichon Rivière, 1985). It becomes a place of belonging for its members who include themselves in a collective group. This operative group encourages the development of individual features, that enhanced by peers, can help thinking, learn, exchange opinions, identify obstacles, that seen from different points of view provide possible solutions. It contributes broaden self -knowledge through the exchange with others. It allows members listening to each other, practicing the assumption of new roles, diminishing anxiety and increasing self -esteem.

The group situation is a multiple experience, in which people not only acquire intellectual knowledge but also the opportunity to keep a confrontation of their own reference framework so as to rectify or confirm their personal grounds, as well as their patterns of behavior and interpretation of reality, specially, referring to education and work (Santoyo, 1981). The need to argue makes their own contradictory ideas and precepts more visible. Thus, it provides tools for young people *to learn how to guide themselves* in an active way and chose to take over a professional and social role (Pelletier & Dumora, 1984).

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are:

- describe sociodemographic profile of young people consultants of vocational guidance group developed in DOE during the period 2014-2016.
- present activities of vocational guidance done before their participation in the groups from the perspective of adolescent autonomy.
- analyze group device appraisal in the setting up of study and work project.

### **Methodological aspects**

This is a descriptive study with a cross sectional design with a mixed methodology, integrating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, which are combined through the different stages of the research (Sampieri Hernández, Collado Fernández, & Lucio Baptista, 2003). This methodology implies a process of collection, analyses and integration of quantitative and qualitative data in the same study in order to face the problem approach.

### **Procedure. The Instruments**

From the quantitative point of view, a self-administered survey with 40 questions was used. These questions explored personal and family aspects, educational path and job situation, future intentions, topics related to guidance (guidance activities already done, expectations of group process, how they feel regarding their guidance, what "UBA" means to them), how they get in touch with the activities and if they wished to be contacted again by DOE psychologists. This survey was administered to each of the participants of the group, at the beginning of the first group meeting.

From the qualitative perspective, a telephone survey was carried out with each participant, a year later of having taken part in the guidance group. Their collaboration to answer this survey was demanded. This instrument was designed to gather information of the student situation regarding studies and work at the time they were surveyed, as well as their appraisal respect guidance groups in which they participated, assessing the degrees of help and contribution. This help, particularly, related to the different topics developed in the guidance groups, the choice of study and work, promoting some reflection about what they experienced and acquired in this groups.

All data and corresponding descriptive analyses were processed through the Statistical Package for Social Science SPSS (SPSS) (V22).

## **Group device description**

During the years 2014, 2015 and 2016, guidance groups for the construction of the educational path and career choice were performed. The groups are offered between March and November.

The objective of the group process is to promote reflection and information through the construction of personal study and work projects and the strategies to develop them.

Each group process consists of four meetings of three hours duration each, with a weekly frequency and an individual interview at the beginning and closing of each group, coordinated by DOE's guidance psychologists.

## **Sample description**

The sample was composed by students who attend the last year of secondary school, in public and private schools of CABA, the GBA and Buenos Aires, which spontaneously approach the DOE to participate in a group guidance process.

17 group processes carried out during 2014, 2015 and 2016 that represented the different moments throughout the year were selected.

The data collected allow us to have a descriptive approach to the sociodemographic profile of the young people who participated in the "Guidance Groups for the construction of the educational path and career choice".

The sample is composed by 191 students; 79 percent are women and 21 percent are men. The average age is 17 years (x: 16.6 years). Respect nationality, 95 percent of the students is Argentinean. 58 percent live in CABA, 35 percent in GBA and 7 percent in the rest of the country. At the time of this study, most of the students were not working (92 percent). 16 percent of the sample, have not participated in any guidance activity at the time of questionnaire administration. Regarding education, the majority attend secondary schools in private institutions (76 percent), and the rest (24 percent) study in public schools.

Regarding the orientation they attend in CABA schools, 39 percent attend Bachelor 12 percent Commercial and 7 percent Technical. The remaining 42 percent is distributed in the other schools of Bs. As.: Natural Science, Social Science, Economy and Administration, Communication and Physical Education. It is important to emphasize that, students of the "Art" orientation, both in CABA and GBA schools, did not participate in the Vocational Guidance groups. This data is associated with the one found in other study (Quattrocchi, Flores, Cassullo, Siniuk, Moulia & De Marco, 2016), where 85percent of the students that attend

## Autonomy in students attending last year of high schools

Art Orientation, continue University or non-university higher education studies in a career related to Art.

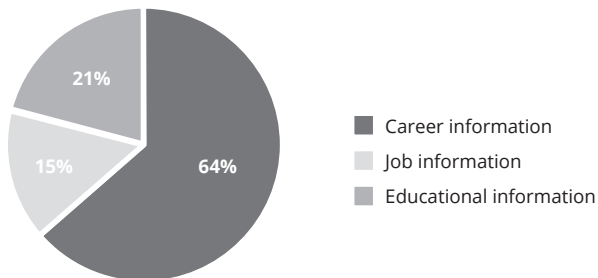
Regarding the appraisal of guidance groups given by the participants, 94 young people were surveyed after one year has passed of the group process done.

### Results

It is necessary to mention that all the vignettes mentioned as follows were extracted from the surveys administered to the young people during the studied period.

As regards the **activities** that the students performed prior to their participation in the guidance groups, the type of information they search was identified in the following topics: about careers, about jobs and about educational institutions. We also inquired about the people of reference they have had at the time of looking information up. Besides, the resources that they used for their guidance process was also questioned. Finally, we asked about the different activities carried out, whether participating in workshops or talks with professionals or advances students, which involves a more active and more autonomous position in the construction of their life project. With regard to the type of information checked, as shown in Graphic N°1, the majority is concentrated on the search of career information (64 percent), with lower percentages in educational institutions information (21 percent) and the search of job information (15 percent).

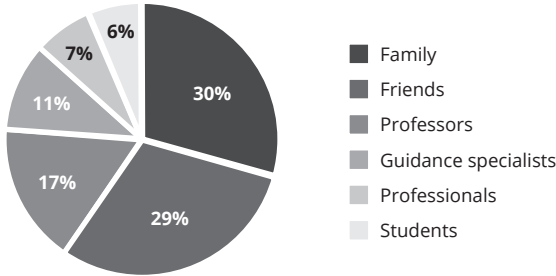
**Graphic N°1**  
***Type of information searched***



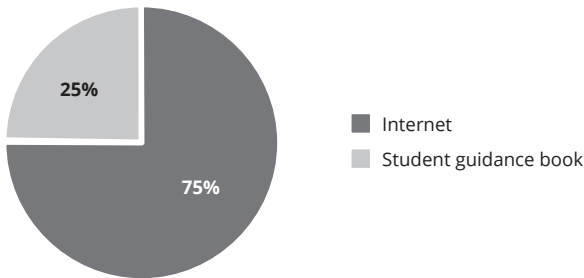
In Graphic N° 2 the people of reference of the information search are presented. More than half of the participants bond for primary groups (family and friends, 59 percent). In a minor extent they choose professors (17 percent), specialists in

guidance (11 percent), professionals (7 percent) and students (6 percent). Internet is the most used resource selected by the adolescents to obtain information.

**Graphic N°2**  
**Referents**



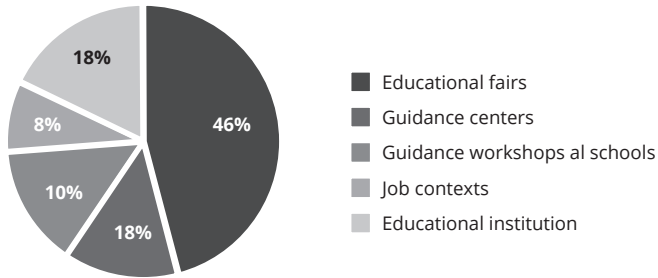
**Graphic N°3**  
**Resources to search information**



With a very high value and regarding the use that young people make of technology, the most used resource for obtaining information is internet (75 percent). In relation with the activities promoted by the institutions where the adolescents go, educational fairs (46 percent) are the ones who concentrate more participants. In a minor extent, adolescents choose educational institutions (18 percent) and participate in guidance centers (18 percent). A low percentage was found in participation in workshops in schools (10 percent) and visits to job contexts (8 percent).



Graphic N°4  
*Activities in institutions*



**Group device appraisal** concerning the setting of project of study and work showed considerable help, 43 percent; some help, 36 percent; much help, 19 percent; and both no and few help, 2 percent.

Adolescents that considered group participation as *of considerable help* gave the following answers: “it helped me think and listen to myself a bit, self-listening exercise”; “because I began with many doubts, I had no project, I was afraid, but I left decided without fears towards others’ opinion”; it helped to order my ideas when I entered University”; “since child I began working and facing life; I had an idea of how things were, I wanted to confirm what I have chosen”; it was useful, if I hadn’t gone to the groups and had registered directly to university, it would have been more violent”; “it was useful talking with others”; “it helped me considerably to make me to know what I wanted”; “because the help of psychologists was useful to clarify doubts and to choose a career, I also realized that an individual approach is needed”.

Reasons given for the option of *some help* deal with: “it didn’t help much the fact that half of the group were companions of my course, that I already knew, so I didn’t get in touch with different situations apart from the ones seen at school”; “as I am too insecure, it helped but I had to continue with guidance”; “I would extend the last meeting when we focused in careers working with computers and books”; “interests, preferences and Student’s Guide Book should be seen at the beginning”; “I went with one idea and I left with a wider perspective although I left with the same idea”; “listening to people was useful”; it was not a relevant factor, but one more help”; “some topics were clarified, it helped me a bit, but didn’t produce changes”; “I could focus in my own qualities and features, and what it

was said in the groups helped me to pay more attention. I am not good studying by heart and this helped me to realize that”; “I would have liked to have a closer approach to the job field of each career, but it can be done later, though”.

Those that chose of much help reported the following: “what I thought in groups I haven’t thought about it before”; “ each time I went, I ended talking about me”; “ I clarified my doubts about the career, I investigated and that helped a lot”; “it provided a lot of tools”; if it weren’t for the group, I would not be in the career;” “working upon the Student’s Guide Book was very useful”; “ because one leaves school with an idea, but the job field is other thing and the group was of great help specially the information, and working in groups that made me feel more confident”; “I liked sharing experiences with others, know what was going on with others, that all had doubts, confirm what I wanted, I realize that one may not be 100percent sure of the career, and it doesn’t mean that one hast to stop thinking about it”.

In the option *no help* and *few help* young people state that the group didn’t produce any change and they expected an individual work.

Regarding appraisal, one of the highlighted aspects young people mentioned was the fact of being accompanied by others and share this vital moment with them. Belonging to a group and build relationships, even temporal ones, constitutes one of the priorities that each participant has while passing through adolescence, creating a different space from family and school. In the case of guidance groups, these become very significant considering that this implies the beginning of the approach to the social adult context.

Participants express the following comments: “it helped me see other people in the same conditions as me, it helped me help take a decision”; “it was great to listen to others, we had the same doubts, and clarified them helped you think what you wanted, the fact of being a “group” helped you think, listening to others’ problems similar to mine was useful”; realize that much people was in the same situation as me and the exercise we did about the filters and discarding careers was very useful”.

## **Discussion**

### *Respect objectives*

Data found show young people with an active position regarding vocational guidance. Effectively they engage in several activities related to career information search, seek advice mainly from relatives and friends. The resource mostly

used is internet and among the institutional activities, the majority of them attend educational fairs.

Information represents a main component in all guidance process and accompanies all actions young people take to build life project of study and work. Both information and social representation they have respect careers, job field and professions are starting points of the group process at DOE. Our objective as guidance psychologists is to carry out a group approach without losing the singularity of the path fulfilled by each participant.

The group itself is expected to lead to changes, from the acquisition of new knowledge and resources to cope with the new situation. The greater wealth of the group, precisely, consists in a larger heterogeneity regarding its participants and larger homogeneity respect the objectives of the job.

### *Respect studied sample*

The majority of the adolescents that register in an autonomous way and participate in the groups, attend secondary studies in private schools. Most of them express their intention to start their studies at University of Buenos Aires allowing them to get in touch with the institution, to have an approach to university life and know the own features of this institution. We must say that, year after year, this phenomenon is being repeated and from DOE other interventions are addressed to public schools.

The Programme "Education for the guidance" has continuously developed since 2002, and offers diverse activities to more than 50percent of public schools of CABA. Among them workshops, guidance meetings, educational fairs are proposed. The observed absence of students belonging to Art orientation at secondary schools leads us to the following questioning. Although it is true that work schedule of the students at these schools is extended, could we think that from these schools the educational and work project is drawn more clearly compared to other school orientations? Does school experience influence? Do these students define their educational and work project earlier?

### *Respect group device appraisal*

Data found and presented, particularly in this study, show that participation in Guidance groups developed by Dirección Técnica Programa de Orientación al Estudiante de la Secretaría de Asuntos Académicos de la UBA contribute significantly in the guidance for young people participating in them. According

to students, this contribution is diverse: promote reflection about different topics- one self, high studies and work field, preferred project, transitions and changes, etc. - adopt a more active role to be guided; begin or deepen in the information exploration, etc. In the exchange, they get a richer view of their own personal situation, sharing concerns and expectations similar to theirs. In turn, the need to argue with others makes contradictions of their own ideas more visible. Reflection and information activities allow them to clarify their future intentions and to anticipate possible actions to carry out their educational and work projects, favoring the active role of the adolescents. On the other hand, positive assessments of the respondents highlight the importance to create adequate spaces for adolescents to approach topics associated to guidance from present perspectives.

Guidance groups' process provide an opening space different to the already known favoring transitions towards new fields where young people begin to separate themselves from their parents and grow confidence among their new companions that belong to new groups of reference. It is expected, that, with time, they experiment less need of support and they become more emotionally independent (Hood, 1986).

The entrance to high studies will demand young people to spend a lot of time away from home in the company of fellow students, so acquiring emotional independence will help them cope with the distance respect their parents as a natural way to adult life.

Data found in this study demonstrate that participants in the group process at DOE have been active developing or carrying out guidance activities before taking part in the group.

These young people showed a positive appraisal of the group process (note that 62 percent of them considered it as of *much and considerable help*)

Finally, this attitude and appraisal highlight the beginning of the development of emotional, attitudinal and behavioral autonomy regarding the setting up of study and work... and life project.