

EQUITY AND GUIDANCE: THE CHALLENGE OF FOLLOWING UP YOUNG GRADUATES

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Abstract

In this paper we present a support strategy of guidance for the young people from vulnerable population, both urban and rural, who have completed high school and are involved in an extension program so called *Equity and guidance: the challenge of a proposal* in state educational institutions from the La Plata, Berisso and Ensenada districts. This program gives them a reflection space to analyze their personal, social and community situation as a self-managed process towards a project of life.

For some time we have supported young people with the purpose of helping them to make a life project. When doing so, we've always noticed the need of finding strategies to provide reasons to carry on the project of completing high school, to search new knowledge, request scholarships, to think of alternatives according to their circumstances, etc.

In this sense, the Project: "Equity and Guidance: the challenge of following up young graduates" is a revealing experience since it shows the urgent need to provide real means to enable communities we work with to make the most of opportunities. For the young people who belong to a vulnerable community, a project of life doesn't mean just thinking of the choice of careers, trainings or jobs. It also means to find how to make it possible in their

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daily life. Everything we make, think and manage in this project has the same purpose: help them so they can make a life project according to their subjectivity.

Key words: guidance – strategies – following up - evaluation

Notion of follow up

Since 2005 we are developing the program: *Equity and guidance: the challenge of a proposal* (Gavilán & Chá, 2006) in state schools from the La Plata, Berisso and Ensenada districts, that is carried out with the purpose that young people from vulnerable population, both urban and rural, reach a reflection space to analyze their personal, social and community situation as a self-managed process towards a life project.

Since 2010, we've undertaken a new challenge: the following up of young graduates as a process that involves two essential areas:

- reviewing the team actions
- support and guidance for the young participants

First, this proposal points out to apply, by means of data collection and systematized information, a review of strategies to know the scope of the intervention, that is to say, to analyze to what extent this program allows young disadvantaged people to break with unsuccessful personal histories and encourage them for future opportunities.

Second, a mechanism is planned that allow knowing not only what happened with that young people after high school, but also providing another guidance strategy through the follow up, in a supporting way.

This means to watch the subjective processes, the paths and experiences of these young people and consider the dialogue of subjects related to:

- a) what they choose at first, its reviewing and re-choosing

- b) the real barriers, that arise when starting the personal project
- c) the actual needs they have in the new stage, after completing high school

In short, taking into account the different realities, we support young people in their educational and occupational choices to build jointly strategies to solve difficulties and create reflective instances to get new visions of themselves, as the focus of their reality and their environment. (Chá & Ruiz, 2010).

We know that equity is not just a matter of access. The central role, success, the insertion to different spaces, the sense of belonging, the overcoming of problems and at last, completing educational stages, are key aspects to become equity a real fact, with opportunities for everyone.

During all these years we have no longer found the young at school but at their homes, neighborhoods, their workplaces, etc. We look for them trying to re-guide their paths, to help them to deal with problems, to be with them when thinking new alternatives where reality leaves its mark: what you think and find and what is possible must learn to coexist.

While carrying out this process, different feelings arise. When talking with each young, a strong decision is held: to help them in the realization of their dreams and the association to their wishes. In the meetings we go through joy, hope, disappointment, helplessness, anger, the strong decision of going on. This is all shared among the young people and the team.

The truth is that these feelings let the team assess what is done, think of new interventions, consider what is done and what still remains to be done, decide again, turn back or go on.

Supporting them when school is no longer the daily meeting place is not an easy task. It involves some almost invisible steps to those who get a new like this: “Juan keeps studying; he passed an exam last week”. To hear these words the coordinators carry out a process that includes multiple calls, have time flexible enough to make interviews and meetings and on the other side, be ready to work with only those who accept the support. It is all a very long process, as an educational counselor said, “to see the results, one have to wait and be very patient ... but at last they will appear”.

The Project points to the graduation issue

By means of different interventions we look for extending one year more the guidance and supporting of the young we work with.

The first year after completing high school is especially hard to them. School has become in many cases an important place to organize routines, and a supporting network that promotes relationships. Their lost is symbolic, but they have also lost a real place, a meeting point, so they feel threatened due to the vulnerability in which they live and adults who support them during the first year after graduation, provide some kind of guarantees to face a stage with so many changes. (Chá & Ruiz, 2012)

The intervention made during the last school year doesn't impact in everyone the same way. Some need longer guidance to make possible their projects, others to keep on considering different means to sustain what they have started.

Specific objectives:

- analyze the difficulties found in the development of the young people projects

- have a support network during the first year after completing high school
- define the parents and family involvement in the project
- assess the changes revealed on the young people's self esteem
- promote proactive attitudes in achieving their life purposes.

Project goals:

- contact to the 80% of graduates
- stay in contact with the 80% of the graduates families
- have a network including all involved schools

Following up first stage

1- *Data base*

The data base is the first step. The essential data of each young man/woman will be useful to know the last stage of the guidance project they were involved: who is this young, what he/she thought of doing when completing high school, how he has developed his project. These three criteria are the target pursued when making the data matrix at the beginning of this intervention.

2.- *Data updating*

At the beginning of the data collection, it is necessary to update some information, fill in some data and enter again contact details. This updating can't be done once, it is a task that runs through the whole intervention and it becomes essential to provide a service to the users.

3.- First phone calls and internet contacts

First contacts involve a lot of work and effort because very often nobody answers, or we have to leave messages to the answer machine, or the e-mails are returned by the internet servers. In these two last years effectiveness has grown up due to the social nets, as Facebook. However, young people get use to change their nick names, they open different e-mail accounts and disappear from others, so that is why sometimes they are found by means of their classmates with whom we meet.

Usually, during this first stage of the following up, we achieve contacts that involves approximately between 60 and 80 % of the young graduates.

If we give a qualitative look at the reception of our phone calls, mostly we'll find young people's surprise when noticing we've kept our promise. They say, for instance, "I can't believe you are calling me!", "oh, you remember me!", "I was almost sure you wouldn't call me!", etc. There are also a few cases that we've soon realized are not interested in keeping the contact with us. After taking into account this kind of resistance, we keep opened to the possibility of their participation, but we don't insist. It happens that sometimes they return and give us the chance to support them.

Following up second stage

4.- Contacting schools

For this project it is crucial making contact again to the schools we work with, because a meaningful number of students who almost complete high school, dropouts high studies because they can't pass the last exams. For these last years the graduation from high school has become an increasing problem that makes us to work back with schools.

Involved in a collective strategy that includes teachers, managers and the follow up team, we can make a progress so these students can get the high school degree that place them in a pathway of real chances to start their chosen training.

On the other hand, this project makes possible a different way of coming back to the institution that met them together for so many years. In these cases they are related to school as graduates, which also strengthen the institution.

Thus we work with institutions that are committed with their graduates and enable us to organize meetings with the young people who come to share their experiences with other students. Even when it happened just once, it should be noted that this support project helped in the creation of a graduate center in one of the schools we work with.

5.- Meetings in the Center of Vocational Occupational Guidance

These meetings essential purpose is to interchange experiences after the graduation, to share the main troubles they've found, to find coping mechanisms to face these difficulties and to develop future strategies.

The idea of group is emphasized due to it allows to create a net of support that involves others going through the same situations, easing the development of necessary skills to overcome obstacles. We consider strategically making the meetings in the university area because it isn't a familiar place and besides it may take to new relationships with young people that come from different institutions.

These meetings can be made requested by the students or can be proposed by the follow up team, according to needs. The young people are not then supported from the scholar scope, but from a new scope where reflections and thoughts take another dimension in the construction of subjectivity, and mainly contribute to improve the self esteem.

6.- Individual Interviews

Besides the group meetings, we've noticed the need of making individual interviews with those who can't meet at the agreed schedule, or when their difficulties require a different kind of intervention.

7.- Home visiting

Home visiting is a part of the intervention with the young's family. It isn't a frequent activity, but in case it occurs, especially when it is requested and agreed with the young, it takes place in a pleasant and trust climate.

Parents thank the visit to the team because they understand –some of them in this very moment- the importance of getting closer to the decisions that their son/daughter are taking, while they make a bond with the team so they can share concerns, expectations and wishes. (Chá, T.; Ruiz, E.; Gómez, N.; Bogarín, F.; Gallardo, Y. & Brhel, N. 2010)

Main problems related to the continuing of higher studies

This is an essential issue due to the most of the young people aims at pursuing a career and considers training very important to have better chances of labor insertion in the future. However these projects are difficult to sustain.

The more frequent reasons of dropout are:

- Economic troubles

Students can't afford even the least expenses needed to undertake any training, mainly to have the study materials they need, to eat sometimes out, to pay travel expenses,

etc. As they haven't money enough, if they want to study, they must work as a condition to achieve their projects. On the other hand the jobs they get –very unstable – complicate the schedule management and also their budget. It is about solving day to day, thus preventing work-study compatibility and facing the harshness of reality. The scenario will be clear: "I can't reach my dreams if I haven't what I need."

- The distance between home and educational institutions

This problem appears more frequently in rural communities, where young people work as laborers at farms or helping their families. Their previous contacts with the city lifestyle have been very few. The distance problem is determined by the kind of public transport and their quality in zones where it takes a long to get to urban sites. Rural works imply waking up very early in the morning and then go to town to school or university, coming back home very late, what is all very tiring. Families approve, but under the condition of not changing their routine.

- Personal conflicts

When completing high school many students – especially women – have to take in charge of their own homes, taking care of their younger brothers and sisters and solving daily issues. The idea is something like “now you've completed high school, it is time to help at home”.

There are also frequent moves. Some families live transiently in this site and return to their original places. It happens with families from neighboring countries, sometimes the young take their decision and go back to their birthplace and live with their relatives that still stay there.

-Early pregnancies

These can occur in the last stage of high school. Even when they wish to study, a baby coming in an insecure situation becomes a reason enough to leave the educational project. On the other hand, a son represents a personal project. Although the situation implies stay in scarcity, it is considered as something that, in some way, provides autonomy.

- Cultural and economical differences

Access to university faces these young people with different cultural habits and personal histories that have almost nothing to do with their own; musical choices, clothing, language, daily habits. It is about auto-exclusion processes revealed in statements as “I don’t feel comfortable”, “I can’t make friends”, “I can’t invite her/him home”, “I don’t fit”. etc.

- Study requirements

In university careers, study is very demanding related to those from their practices at high school. Many of these young complain of poor training that don’t help them to pursue high education. It is about unequal education that arises due to their families’ cultural and social restrictions. From this perspective, it’s clear that school reproduces the inequality pathway.

- Completing high school

We’ve noticed that increasingly many students that don’t dropout can’t graduate due to disapproving many subjects and consequently they can’t pursue their educational project during the first year after graduation. This is a barrier that our supporting proposal tries to take out because it not only blocks educational projects – including the troubles pointed in the above paragraphs – but also in those related to improve their situations in the labor market, since the high school degree is the least requirement to get a job.

Some final considerations

There are no doubts that involving in a guidance program awakes in the young people unexpected curiosity. Besides, they have to face their reality, in part leaving the idea of living the moment and start wondering about what will become of them in the future.

The idea that the high school degree is an essential requirement has been established in the collective imaginary of these populations. Even when this certainty contributes to students to stay at school until they complete their studies, much remains to transform in the personal, familiar, social and community viewpoints.

They can also “resign themselves” with the unstable jobs they have to support themselves and help their families, and in many cases they have to choose what is “urgent” instead of what is “important”.

Dropout is still a problem that concerns educational institutions. Students in the final year from secondary schools continue dropping out because they have too many pendant exams, because they need to work to their own support or because they lose hope and resign themselves about the social level they have. Even with scholarships and notebooks. It is a long process that requires still more time.

We are sure that we’ve contributed to these young can think of a different future for themselves. In the history of the schools we’ve worked with, there aren’t reports of young that have thought of pursuing high training; but despite being sometimes unsuccessful, some of them overcame problems and strongly sustain decisions. Progress is small, but in education as in guidance, it takes time for changes.

That’s why we insist on supporting projects that don’t create vulnerability, that don’t make them feel helplessly again. Even when we, as university teachers, hope they will join university, we realize that maybe this is not the right time to do it and we’ll have to work a lot to achieve it.

If we only think that most of these students we work with are the first generation in their families that reach a high school degree, we should understand, without being pessimistic, they are still far from university scope. Therefore we think it very encouraging that over the 50% of this young group we have supported in this follow up project, is fighting to improve their chances of social inclusion by means of some kind of training, even not university.

The years subsequent to the project “Equity and Guidance” that strengthen the links with these young people, have a side benefit which is that they are sure to find, when needed, a professional team available to support them.

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