

INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATIONAL ORIENTATION AND THE PROSPECTS OF THE COUNSELOR

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Abstract

School is no longer the repository of social knowledge, nor the teachers those who teach, or the students those who only learn; the gap between the educational ways of the classroom and every day life appears to be getting wider, due to mounting technological growth. It is undeniable that high-school is more than a school level between junior high-school and college; it turns out to be where a student can make decisions about his or her immediate future from the institutional perspective, in the company of a counselor. This research work presents an analysis of the “Programa de Orientación Educativa” (Educational Counseling Program), as well as the opinions and perceptions of counselors at High Schools belonging to the University of Guanajuato with regard to their academic and labor situation, to how they teach their courses, to what Educational Counseling means to them and to what their role with students is.

A quantitative methodology is employed, by means of an on-line questionnaire with 24 questions that was applied at 10 schools to 21 out of 33 counselors, through the action of the General Direction of the Junior High School Division (“Dirección General del Colegio del Nivel Medio Superior”) of the University of Guanajuato. Data were analyzed with the assistance of two counselors and two psychologists from Salvatierra’s High School (“Escuela del Nivel Medio Superior de Salvatierra”). Results show the perceptions and expectations that counselors have about the importance of their practice; they express themselves in terms that enclose senses and contradictions. This means that a part of it is related to the institutional nature of their work, and another consists of representations that express interest in the affective and emotional development of students, within two limitations: institutional regulations and the counselor’s own participation. A counselor can provide each student with meaningful tasks in accordance with the student’s skills, and he has into account the student’s problems when issuing his instructions, which adapt to contents and goals of the Educational Counseling program.

Keywords: Education, Orientation, Counsellor, School, Tutoring.

1 INTRODUCTION

The University of Guanajuato has 10 Junior High Schools (“Escuelas del Nivel Medio Superior, ENMS”) in the cities of Celaya, Irapuato, Guanajuato, León (day and night shifts), Pénjamo, Salamanca, Salvatierra, San Luis de la Paz and Silao. The mission of the Junior High School Program (“Bachillerato”) is to form students in an integrated fashion with basic knowledge in the fields of science, humanities and art, and with the development of methods to understand and attend to their surroundings, as well as to be critical and constructive authors in society; also, it is meant to endow students with the necessary skills to continue studying or to become part of the labor market. It is a 6 semester long preparatory program whose curriculum aims at the students’ being able to develop a first personal and social synthesis that will grant them understanding of society and their time, and at the students’ being prepared for the fulfillment of their life plans. At present, three two-hours-a-week courses from the Educational Counseling Program are taught during the first three semesters, in which no quantitative grade is issued after the final evaluation; the course is either credited or not. Those courses are important so that a student will be able to select a specialty when he or she gets to the fifth semester.

The Educational Counseling Program's goal is first to get a student to feel as part of the University and to take responsibility for his or her own subject load, and then to get him to know the regulations, methods of study and an analysis of his or her condition as an adolescent. Besides, it intends to get the students to value the importance of planning for their future, of consolidating their self-knowledge, and of analyzing their needs, limitations and opportunities in order to act on their life plans. A student shall also perform his or her own vocational diagnosis, evaluate the socio-cultural factors influencing his choice of major, and look into the different occupational alternatives. Likewise, he or she will get engaged in a set of learning activities meant to level out the achievement of objectives, as would be field observations, presentations of assigned topics before an audience, group reflections, case studies, experience activities, informative visits, and definition of his or her academic and non-academic goals and of his personal strategies. Students shall also diagnose their occupational expectations and the personal and contextual factors that bear on their choice of major, analyze the different study alternatives, interview professionals, and devise a list of subjects to take based on their vocational/occupational future. This leads to posing questions on the Educational Counseling courses about how much it is in the hands of the educational counselor to intervene in the learning that is required so that a high-school student will manage to acquire the knowledge, skills and values of the Educational Counseling courses. It is not known how the Educational Counseling Program may be based on research efforts that consider the needs of the counselor in each school.

1.1 The problem

From a perspective of theory, the Educational Counseling Program starts from a functionalistic approach, since its aim is to articulate the skills, interests and vocational opportunities that are offered to students. Besides, it has to do with the students' personal features in terms of skills and interests related to the characteristics required by a job. A counselor can assign significant tasks to each student according to his or her capabilities, and he has the student's problems in mind at the time of issuing directions; the tasks adapt to the contents and objectives of the program; however, it is evident that the counseling courses attempt to anticipate the choice made by the productive system.

It is possible that counselors do not realize the situation in which students, since High-School, may be preparing to hold a job; reality makes it evident that every day there are fewer students who manage to gain access to public higher education. Instead, it is attempted that the students acquire identification with the University, together with the capabilities or competencies supported by the students' performance in school, that they develop a life plan and that, based on it; they make the relevant decisions on what they want to do with their lives, in the vocational and occupational fields.

On the other hand, a counselor will use didactic methods to engage learning, by means of the presentation and solution of hypothetical problems. Lists of subjects to be taken by students are taken care of from the very School Affairs Direction ("Dirección Escolar"). There is little organization on the side of the counselor regarding the products of learning, such as essays, auto-biographies and strategies about making a life plan, occupational demand interviews or professionographic research reports. Even more, even though guidance is provided for a group in the classroom, there are still individual learning practices and diagnostic tests about interests and skills, which are of little help towards self-knowledge and the making of vocational and occupational decisions.

At present, it is undeniable that high-school is more than a school level between junior high-school and college. It turns out to be where a counselor can help a student make decisions about his or her immediate future from the formal/institutional perspective, in addition to the construction of his or her life plan; however, little does the counselor know about this educational space. It is then valid to ask whether there is an interest, from the point of view of institutional regulations, in knowing what and how the counselor thinks. We trust there is, since otherwise, the outlook for the counselor and the students is gloomy.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to set up the analysis of the Educational Counseling Program and of the opinions and perceptions of counselors, a 24-question, both open and closed, on-line questionnaire was applied to 21 out of 33 counselors at 10 high-schools of the University of Guanajuato. For this process, support was received from the General Direction of the Junior High School Division ("Dirección General del Colegio del Medio Superior") of the University of Guanajuato. Data were analyzed with the assistance of two counselors and two psychologists from Salvatierra's High School.

3 RESULTS

To carry out these research activities, a group has been made with two counselors from Salvatierra's Junior High School, two psychologists and the researcher. It has been denominated as a "collaboration group", whose main role is to contribute and deliberate towards the construction of the object of study, the research problem, the definition of objectives, and the design, piloting and application of instruments, as well as the participation in making a plan for the Educational Counseling Courses.

This section refers to the perception of most of the educational counselors providing courses at the different high schools of the University of Guanajuato, in order to know the object of study from a wider context and to comprehend how it is understood beyond the local context of Salvatierra's Junior High School. The objective is to learn about issues regarding the counselors' professional formation and social and labor situation, as well as their perceptions about Educational Counseling and their opinion about the students' decision making and life plans.

Most counselors (85%) are between 29 and 50 years in age. 50% are women and 50% are men. 70% have a permanent contract, while 30% have a temporary one. 50% have an assignment between 20 and 40 hours per week, while the rest have 19 or less. 50% have between 10 and 23 years of seniority, and the rest have 9 years or less. 42% have a Master's Degree, generally in the field of Educational Research or Teaching Development, and the majority (85%) have Psychology as their major. The courses they teach in high school are mainly Educational Counseling, Ethics, Sociology, Seminar on Clinical Psychology and Seminar on Social Psychology. They frequently attend diploma courses, short courses, seminars and colloquia, both in the field of Educational Counseling as in the fields of values, competencies, psychology, and the like. 60% of them also teach at other institutions, generally private.

Counselors report that they prepare their lessons by means of chronograms, mental maps, readings, bibliographic review, diagnoses, class journals, etc. They use conceptual maps, films, debates, the internet, presentations, interviews, exams, individual and group work, essays, questions, etc. They evaluate their students through activity follow up, workbooks, reports, feedback, multiple choice formats, written tests, case studies, interviews, attendance and participation in class, revision of students' notebooks, initial evaluations, ongoing evaluation, etc. They are evaluated by students and by the School Affairs Direction, and these evaluations have mainly been useful to improve the contents of their courses, improve class environment, achieve course objectives, and design new class activities. In order to enhance school performance, counselors conduct counseling sessions, diagnoses, tasks, presentations, class participation, homework assignments, group counseling, motivational techniques, and the like.

The meaning that Educational Counseling has for counselors is diverse. It may consist in helping a student to get to know himself, clarifying vocational identity, contributing to adolescent formation, providing support services for the student, helping students find their place in their personal and professional context, leading students to gain awareness and make decisions about their life plans, and aiding them to reflect upon their reality, to exploit their potential, and to find their major. A counselor mentions that the object of counseling:

"is to provide theoretical and pragmatic elements that will allow a student gain awareness and make a decision regarding his or her life plan."

The everyday activities that counselors perform are also diverse, different for each one of them, and only partially following and related to the topics in the curriculum. Such activities have to do with permanent counseling, tutoring, information about universities, diagnoses, tests, methods of study, decision making, teaching lessons before the class, workshops, psychological attention, life plans, etc. Opinions are divided; some point out that their activities are acknowledged by students, other teacher and the school authorities, whereas there are others who say it is not so. Regarding curriculum contents, opinions are divided as to whether they help to reflection and decision making by students; those who say they do are those counselors who are younger and have less seniority, pointing out that it all depends on the strategies used by counselors, whereas more experienced counselors think that contents do not help students reflect upon decision making, and they say it is due to lack of time, that there is need for an additional subject related to Educational Counseling in the high school, and that there has to be a wider openness to the outside, as would be parents and labor markets. Most counselors point out that Educational Counseling courses have little or no articulation with tutoring, and only a minority says they are frequently or very related.

With regard to their role as guides in the students' process towards making decisions and a life plan, they refer to accompanying the students, and to leading them to gain awareness. They also mention their role as facilitators of learning, to find and lay out educational tools that will help a student in reflecting and getting to know herself. It is also mentioned the use of different methodologies in class, such as life histories and everyday life anecdotes, investigation of skills and interests, the strengthening of social reflection, the creation of an environment of empathy and communication, and outreach to parents. On this matter, an educational counselor says:

"I consider that a counselor's role is basic as a facilitator and guide for her students, who fosters responsibility, solidarity and respect for the opinion of classmates. To favor teamwork and to make a student aware of being a part in building his or her own life plan, to favor the development of self-esteem. To support the student so that he makes his own decisions, to respect his interests and motivate him to develop his skills."

On the other hand, the junior high school Educational Counseling curricula in the context of the University of Guanajuato, and particularly of the object of study, involve few actions in collaboration with the students' families. Courses are limited to the space in the classroom, with little interaction with the work and family spheres, let alone information techniques.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The perceptions and expectations held by counselors about the importance of their practice are expressed in terms that enclose senses and contradictions, which means that a part of them is related to the institutional nature of their work, but another expresses interest in the affective and emotional development of students, having two limitations: institutional regulations and the counselor's own participation. In the case of younger counselors, there is usually some control exerted by the institution upon their roles; the older ones, instead, focus more pleasantly on their guidance role.

1. The role of counselors with their identity. Counseling teachers can construct a sense of identity according to their formation and how they feel in the role they play, from the meaning that it has for them what they represent socially and that matches their experience, in a direct relationship with the composition and cohesion of the group they belong to, with the time spent in the academy, and with the personal and group merits. It is frequent to notice a gap between the way they conceive their own professional practice and the knowledge they acquired during their formation. Counselors are denied in their cultural history and their own existence, and they are judged against standards that do not acknowledge juvenile diversity.
2. Counselors and academic performance. Quite often, counselors are more concerned with the knowledge acquired, high failing rates and educational retardation, than with the affective consequences that a student may suffer.
3. The role of counselors as administrators. The knowledge that a counselor has of his or her self-esteem turns out to be important, for if he projects trust and respect in his messages to the students, they will probably improve their performance and their awareness of themselves. Very frequently, students are disrespected and ridiculed, which helps make them unhappy, submissive and passive; the counselor then becomes a judge that aids in the fulfillment of the objectives of power. It is the teacher who uses the elements of knowledge to control and interrogate the students and turn them into subordinated and disciplined individuals.
4. The role of counselors and some myths. A counselor's practice is surrounded by different myths, such as the belief that schooling allows having a better lifestyle, that adults can give better advice, that those students who have a good counselor will be better professionals, that the counselor's work is irreplaceable in the life of the school and the students. In this sense, it is important for counselors to ask themselves questions that will lead them to understand their role from their own perspective, and to learn how they conceive themselves and what concerns they have.

Educational counseling programs must aim at accompanying and facilitating knowledge acquisition, and also at the organization of studying and learning in general, paying special attention to the values and attitudes of students, and to their formation as human beings, sustained in a democratizing practice of team work that considers the classroom as a space for negotiation, to facilitate awareness acquisition and respect for the integrity and the ideology of the student, as well as the development of his or her individual, social and labor potential. A counselor in the high schools of the University of Guanajuato must have the adequate competencies to identify, attend to and channel unknown and complicated problems of a large number of students. Such massification has given rise to confusion

and failure of counselors to fulfill their role, above all with regard to the support of their integral development and the definition and scope of their life plan. Educational Counseling in the classroom has been given the worst share, since it is treated as a disciplinary field, when its educational nature resides in the formation of students. This curtails students' trust.