

International scientific seminar

Life designing interventions for decent work and sustainable development

Author: Prof. Leandro Legaspi, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Title: Vulnerable youth. From available work to decent work: meanings, future prospects and path ways. The contribution of career guidance and counseling

Abstract

In Argentina, vulnerable young people with irregular educational path ways can often only find jobs that do not qualify as decent work. Our research emphasizes the importance that young people assign to education for entering in the job market. It also exposes the gap between the jobs that are realistically available and the better quality jobs to which they aspire, and identifies the personal and contextual barriers that hinder access to these better jobs. Career guidance and counselling can help link these expectations to better alternatives through approaches that result in an inclusive and sustainable future.

Introduction

This article aims at picking up the issue of the symposium: ¿How can Interventions in Guidance and Counseling help individuals and certain social groups in vulnerable situations build sustained and sustainable life projects and career pathways, in order to obtain decent work from a perspective of social justice?

For this purpose, I introduce the results of research conducted on the education and work paths, and social representations of young Argentine individuals from vulnerable sectors. This research helps us identify the specific problems we need to focus on, in order to improve their living conditions and help them build fair and sustainable career paths ways and life projects.

Furthermore, I develop some ideas for intervention and main issues with the intention of contributing to finding answers for the problems identified.

Argentina: overall context

Currently, 40 % of young people between the ages of 16 and 29 live in poverty, while 10 % are indigent (INDEC, 2019a).

Unemployment rates reach 33 % for young women, and 18 % for young men. Furthermore, 6 out of 10 young men and women lack formal employment (INDEC, 2019b).

The labor market is segmented, with two clearly differentiated circuits: formal and informal. There is hardly any chance of movement between these circuits, which have totally unequal labor rights and working conditions (Centro de Estudios del Trabajo y el Desarrollo, 2018).

Workers of the informal sector have poor quality jobs, low salaries, long hours, poor occupational health and safety conditions, total lack of training opportunities, and difficult access to the legal system and social security protection services. 59 % of young people are estimated to work in the informal sector.

On the other hand, 35 % of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 have no high school diploma. In addition, 1 out of 4 individuals that reach the senior year of high school do not manage to obtain a degree (Anuario Estadístico Educativo 2018, 2018).

Growing up in poverty conditions, without the possibility of having access to quality jobs, with only informal and precarious work experiences, and insufficient educational levels, are all factors that contribute to expose young argentines to situations of high vulnerability. Such factors have repercussion on the characteristics of their future social insertion, identity construction, and particularly on their career paths and objective possibilities of having access to decent work (Aisenson, Legaspi & Valenzuela, 2018; ILO, 2014)

Research

Methodology

The study is part of an international research study: "Perception of decent work and the future among low qualified youths in northern and southern countries" (Cohen-Scali & Pouyaud, 2017). An exploratory and descriptive, empirical study, was conducted with a qualitative approach based on the case study method (Stake, 1994).

The goal of such research is to understand how young people from vulnerable social sectors perceive work, work experiences and the concept of decent work. In addition, it aims to connect such perceptions with their life paths ways and prospects future, by analyzing their particular life stories.

Data collection was obtained through in-depth, semi-structured, interactive interviews.

The sample is composed of a total of ten young workers in vulnerable circumstances – 4 women and 6 men – between the ages of 20 and 25. They are high school dropouts, not currently studying, with no high school diploma, and with low qualifications.

Discourse analysis was used to study the life stories, and make relations between the text and social context, while taking into account the modes of enunciation and transmission (Maingueneau, 1989).

The objective is to identify the meanings associated to life, educational and work paths, work in general, and actual work experiences in particular.

Main findings

For this occasion I have selected results that show the particular social representations made about work, their personal work experiences, and future employment prospects.

Perceptions about work and work experiences

In Argentina, the deep and never ending economic crisis has a great impact on the local labor market – unemployment, precarious work, informal employment – and it reflects directly on the difficulty of obtaining and keeping a job. This objective scenario has an impact on how work is considered and on the perception and value given to work experiences.

The young people interviewed for this study perform low quality, precarious work, that requires the use of basic skills, in non-adequate conditions, and for which they receive low wages. For them, getting a job is a matter of “luck”. Particularly, having access to a job with the attributes of decent work, results almost as an ideal goal, visualized very unlikely to occur.

The lack of quality job offers, and their actual experiences in precarious jobs, puts these young people in a fragile position. This is reflected in their attitudes of hopelessness, discouragement, and conformism towards the possibility of change and improvement; and the appropriation and internalization of bad working conditions, and lack of knowledge of basic labor rights. That is why the future is often visualized in a pessimistic way.

Such pessimistic viewpoint, in turn, favors the reproduction of vulnerable situations in the labor market and the perpetuation of low quality, unsatisfying work experiences. The continuity in time of these experiences contributes to the

construction of fragile, precarious and informal pathways, which tend to normalize the objective working conditions of the jobs they perform. And, on the other hand, there are hardly any quality work experiences for them to compare with.

Unstable economic and labor market conditions, paired with personal and family uncertainty, also have an impact on the value given to work.

Personal and family instability and uncertainty relative to economic and employment matters, also have an impact on the value given to work. Faced with the true possibility of losing their job, or not obtaining a new one, they value having it, regardless of the working conditions and the degree of satisfaction which that job has to offer. Therefore, the job held is represented as a scarce good and a necessity at the same time. In addition, those that contribute with income to the family economy have a much smaller margin of freedom of choice. This increases their vulnerability, since they must ensure their daily survival to cover basic needs. Working for them is not a choice or a preference, but an urgent necessity: *"there is no choice"*. In accordance, there is no mention to young people related activities, free time, or the possibility of personal and professional development.

These young individuals present fragmented and discontinued educational paths, along with low socioeconomic conditions. In some cases, the possibility to continue in the educational system is strongly conditioned by the need to work, which puts them in an even more vulnerable position relative to work and study.

Work is visualized as an activity that does not allow neither the satisfaction nor the expression of psychological needs. A disconnection is noticed relative to preferences, interests, satisfaction, pleasure, possibilities for development, and positive experiences. The work they perform does not include the attributes and experiences that decent work promotes and favors. A job is an activity to cover basic needs and there seems to be a consensus about the fact that *"no one works in something they like doing."*

How do they imagine their future employment and what do they wish for?

The precarious conditions of the labor market, as well as the career paths in low quality jobs, are linked to the hope of a better quality job in the future.

The expectation of obtaining a *"better"* job, is associated with *"growth"*, with an adequate income, and with the possibility of envisioning the future in a more foreseeable way.

The young people in the study perceive the fact that a degree can improve their chances in gaining access to a better job, obtain *"something more"*; a less precarious job, more stability, *"jobs that do not fall through"*. That is why they aspire to finish high school and/or develop some job that can improve their chances of employability.

Time administration and use is a critical variable which confronts these young people with a dilemma with respect to their future projects: to finish their studies and develop their interests, they need a job. But, they will only be able to achieve those projects if they count with enough economic resources, which may only be obtained by working long hours, which in turn takes time from being able to realizing such projects. In the future prospects mentioned, this dilemma is solved by delaying their interests and the obtaining of a degree.

Contributions by the Guidance and Counseling

Returning to the initial question: how can Interventions in Guidance and Counseling help individuals and certain social groups in vulnerable situations build sustained and sustainable life projects and career paths, in order to obtain decent work from a perspective of social justice?

For young people over the age of 18 in vulnerable situations, what social and institutional structures allow for their discontinued and fragmented career paths with informal employment? Both, the labor market and the educational system signal them as those who do not fit in, those that do not obtain satisfactory academic results, those who drop out, those who do not have the skills and knowledge required.

Therefore, I believe that the guidance and counseling is a suitable intervention and social practice that may contribute to the debate and offer solutions to the problems at hand.

As a result of our research and intervention programs, we have defined some issues that are essential to help achieve sustained and sustainable life projects, insertions, and career paths (Aisenson, G. Legaspi, , Czerniuk et al, 2019; Aisenson, G., Legaspi & Valenzuela, 2018; Aisenson, G. Legaspi & Valenzuela, 2018 et al, 2015, 2013, 2009; Legaspi. & Aisenson, D., 2005; Legaspi, Duro, Lavatelli et al, 2010). This approach suggests placing young people in the position of having to build their own life, become the main protagonist of their own lives, with the possibility to develop critical consciousness to reflect about themselves and the conditions in which they seek their future and social insertions, while trying to expose lack of opportunities, oppressive conditions, and unfair situations (Blustein, Mc Whirter & Perry, 2005; Kenny, Blustein, Gutowsky et al, 2018; Savickas, Nota, Rossier et al, 2009).

I highlight the main issues, the interventions made and the levels at which they have been addressed:

At an individual level

- Positioning, representations and attitudes that reinforce vulnerability in the labor market.
- No recognition of soft skills
- Disconnection between work and psychological needs
- Limited future prospects

These issues may be treated through interventions to build together new narratives and learning processes on:

- Identity and youth: time administration, exercising new roles, building new routines, transit transitions
- Appropriation and construction of agency to produce changes
- Develop critical consciousness relative to working conditions and labor rights, in view of decent work
- Temporality and nature of life projects and career paths
- From learning in informal contexts to the appropriation of knowledge and resources for work

At an Institutional, community and public policy level

- Create and encourage objective conditions to help develop accompanied insertions and decent lives, and promote and facilitate the access to decent work.
 - Promote the commitment towards study, work, and other important activities
 - Encourage social values: tolerance, equality, respect for others, solidarity, social justice and sustainable development (Cohen-Scali, 2018)
 - From the logic of the labor market to sustained human development and decent work
 - From individualism to social responsibility (Podgórna & Podgórnny, 2018)

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