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The school counselor: competencies in a constructivist model of counseling for career development

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Abstract

Counseling on career development service is difficult to quantify in the immediately observable results after completion of a certain activity. A normal question arises in this context: ‘Who is responsible for this?’ We believe it is the responsibility of several factors aimed at educating and training young people to achieve professional development, and the school counselor represents one of these factors. This paper proposes a theoretical and research approach to the process of career counseling from a constructivist perspective. Why constructivist counseling? This approach is an alternative that can be translated to a certain group of beneficiaries in order to support identification and development of a path forward in professional life which will provide them with the opportunity to achieve success. We underline the term “alternative” in order to draw attention to the fact that this is one of the working variants that can be employed by counselors in accordance with the needs and characteristics of each group of beneficiaries. This paper presents an adaptation of the constructivist approach in career counseling in the school medium, where we support it as a strategy to the school counselors, considering them as professionals. We hope that this model would be an alternative to the traditional model of counseling, based on the idea of person-job fit. The analysis of school counselors’ activities is based on two directions: a) the choice of intervention strategies in relation to activities specific to the school they work in (middle school, theoretical/technological/vocational high school), and b) professional experience (beginners or not).

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1. Introduction

Why career development counseling for students? Many will say that initially we need to: shape a personal profile, identify an occupation, prepare for a job, look for and get a job, practice the profession the young graduate is qualified for and then we can talk about “career development”. Traditionally, those who ask for career counseling services outside school consider that it is necessary to support career development when one wants to: be visible on the labor market, draw attention to personal CV, promote professional achievements, and take on other professional responsibilities. We hope that this theoretical analysis of the term “career development” highlights new opportunities for school counselors’ intervention and proposes new action models which will extend the career counselors’ scope of activity in an educational context and which will bring additional benefits to applicants for/beneficiaries of counseling. We believe that, besides the young people’ opting and preparing for a profession, it is advisable that they would undergo a program to facilitate personal development in order to concretely support the choice they made and to contribute to future professional performance.

Counseling on career development is a relatively new niche and it is a comprehensive approach for the preparation of young people for personal, professional and social success. It includes the usual activities that are undertaken for educational and vocational guidance, but these are included in a much broader range of action that has direct links with developments in social, economic, and labor market changes, which the phrase “personal and professional achievement” signifies. Currently, “success” in general is different for everyone, and comparison terms are relative. The society in which we live defines success around three elements: power, money, fame. Each individual’s success has a different meaning: getting a job to provide the financial resources needed for a decent life, (a well-paid job), a job “high-ranked in the social hierarchy”, the possibility of starting and supporting a family, job promotions, acquisition of new knowledge and skills, etc. Another common phenomenon is represented by the large number of young people who work in professional fields socially valued and who hold “key positions” in a company, but who had average results in school. ‘How did they manage to achieve success?’ is the question asked by those who, although having had good and very good results in school, are dissatisfied with their careers. Actually, the former have developed personal skills and competencies that contribute to effectively solving tasks related to their job that facilitates communication and networking with others which also contribute to job satisfaction etc. There is yet another group of people for whom these issues of “recognition and prestige” are not the most important in outlining career success. Everyone has their own vision on job satisfaction, on the professional field they work in or on their own professional development. Career success can be found in: the activities carried out in the workplace, the balance between family and work life, getting financial and professional satisfaction, and also time spent with the family; bonuses received for performance, the courage to start over after a professional failure, gaining new knowledge etc.

Counseling on career development service is difficult to quantify in the immediately observable results after completion of a certain activity. It is based on the acquisition of information on the self and on occupational fields, which in turn will affect attitudinal and behavioral changes on the individual level (on the beneficiary respectively). The attitude towards work, profession, family, professional development, competitiveness and professional relationships, actually reflects future graduates’ professional behavior and often these issues are not found in their training. A normal question arises in this context: ‘Who is responsible for this?’ We believe it is the responsibility of several factors aimed at educating and training young people to achieve professional development, and the school counselor represents one of these factors.

The study focuses on both a theoretical and a research approach to the process of career counseling from a constructivist perspective. If constructivism is a philosophy of learning that provides insights both on how people learn and on those who guide this process of learning in counseling, constructivism has the same meaning since it teaches young people how to plan their lives in an organized manner so that they are more likely to succeed in their personal, professional and social life.

Why constructivist counseling? This approach is an alternative that can be translated to a certain group of beneficiaries in order to support identification and development of a path forward in professional life which will provide them with the opportunity to achieve success. We underline the term “alternative” in order to draw attention
V. Peavy (2001) states that, when it comes to constructivist counseling, he prefers the terms “help-seeker” and “helper” to those of client and counselor. Some of the distinctive features include: constructivist counseling is a model of self-creation, it is a culture-centered approach and it is based on the concept of “cultural tool”; the counselors are encouraged to use an “everyday vocabulary” in order to communicate effectively with the clients etc. It is a co-constructivist approach in which the person who seeks help and that who offers help are considered experts. The person seeking help plays the expert role that can not be questioned in regards to his own life, while the expert advisor creates a framework for effective communication in a “building” which is used by both in order to continue their endeavor.

Based on our findings, we suggest an adaptation of the constructivist approach on career counseling in the school medium, adaptation necessary for the school counselors, regarded as professionals. We hope that this model would be an alternative to the traditional model of counseling, based on the idea of person-job fit. From the counselors’ perspective, we assumed that this work style is favored by the professionals who have gained experience and who work with a specific group of beneficiaries, namely high school students. It is a model that provides freedom and is based on a joint effort to identify and build a career plan path. For students who do not have such a course, the model provides a favorable framework to explore different alternatives without having to make forced choices and for the experienced counselor it is favorable context in which they can assert their creativity in developing a strategy for personalized intervention.

2. Research methods

The purpose of research is to identify the school counselors’ perception on counseling activities taking place in constructivist manner.

Research hypotheses:

- There are significant differences between school counselors regarding the dependent variable of the perception on career counseling according to the independent variable the teaching degree, meaning that specialists with II or I degree will assess activities specific to constructivist counseling as more important than those belonging to traditional counseling as compared to their younger colleagues who have only tenure in teaching.
- There are significant differences between school counselors regarding the dependent variable perception on career counseling according to the independent variable of the workplace, meaning that professionals working with high school students will consider constructivist counseling as more important than traditionalist counseling as compared to their colleagues working with middle school students.

Study variables:

- Dependent variable: perceptions on career counseling (importance of constructivist / traditionalist counseling; the frequency of constructivist/traditionalist career counseling).
- Independent variable: the teaching degree (tenure in teaching, second teaching degree, first teaching degree) and the workplace (middle school, high school).

In order to identify trans-individual differences regarding perceptions on career counseling process, we used the CCSES questionnaire – Career Counseling Self-Efficacy Scale (O’Brien, Heim Bikos, Heppner, Flores, 1997).

The initial questionnaire contained 54 specific activities in career counseling in both the traditionalist and the constructivist manner. Respondents had to indicate on a Likert scale with six steps the extent to which they usually carried out these activities.

The questionnaire was translated and adapted to the Romanian population, and it was pre-tested on a group of experts. These experts were asked to read the 54 items that are specific to traditional counseling and that describe best constructivist counseling. Centralizing the responses caused the removal of a considerable number of items that were considered ambiguous by experts so that, finally, we kept our questionnaire for a total of 24 activities to describe the two types of career counseling.

Deviation from the initial questionnaire is represented by the introduction of a new dimension, namely the importance given by school counselors to such activities. The subjects participating in the study were required to
assess these activities both in terms of importance and frequency with which they are used in school activities. The internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha) of questionnaire is very good (0.712), which allowed us to use the questionnaire reliably.

The group of subjects participating in the study is formed by psychologists/pedagogues from psycho-pedagogical assistance offices and centers. On a regional level, the total number is 344. The study involved a total of 108 school counselors. The group of respondents consisted of: 7 male and 101 female subjects (prompting not taking into account this dimension, since it is not a balanced group); 41 specialists who have tenure in teaching, 36 with second degree in teaching, 31 with first degree in teaching, 26 counselors who work only in middle school, 48 who work only in high school.

As statistical methods, in order to test hypotheses, we used: the Pearson correlation, the independent samples T-Tests, and ANOVA One Way. Statistical data confirmed initial assumptions, the objective of the study being achieved.

3. Results analysis

Analysis of the study's results takes into account two identified variables.

The effect of the independent variable of the academic rank:

- School counselors who so far are awarded only tenure in teaching expressed their interest in counseling with preference to the traditionalist one;
- Their colleagues who are awarded II or I degree in teaching consider constructivist counseling activities as more useful.

The workplace and the role of the counselors from a constructivist counseling perspective:

- Those working with both high school and middle school students appreciate and frequently use the constructivist model;
- Those working only with high school students use both models;
- Those working with middle school students prefer traditional counseling.

In conclusion, we can state the following:

- It is necessary to optimize the counselors’ competencies so that to use other models than the conventional ones:
- This could take as a starting point, the “competencies model” (G. Pânişoară and I.O. Pânişoară, 2007), which responds to changes at the organization level (needs, requirements), to the efficient implementation responsibilities of the job. Some of the specialist skills deemed necessary for the best performance in the workplace include: searching for information, conceptual flexibility, focusing on results, focusing on self- and others-development, self-confidence, proactive orientation.

- Competencies development can have several levels: novice, beginner-advanced, competent, professional, expert.

Most professional counselors’ working style and approach is considered eclectic in their use of theories and techniques. An eclectic approach is effective if used knowingly, but it is problematic for a counselor who is not familiarized with applying these theories in practice (such as beginners). Eclectic-integrative approaches are becoming “more and more necessary and useful in achieving psycho-pedagogical counseling” (I. Al. Dumitru, 2008).

Junior counselors’ preference to use the traditional model is supported by the idea that an eclectic model found in description levels: junior specialists have not had the opportunity to experiment with different models of intervention and it is recommended that the onset of activity preferably should use one or two theories.

Counselors who have already acquired experience (those who are awarded second and first degree in teaching) can use a specific technical eclectic approach, i.e. different techniques are used, without adhering to a particular theory (Cavanagh, 1982); an eclectic approach is recommended since the counselor shows deep understanding of the counseling theories.

Preference for using the constructivist model by counselors operating in both secondary school and high school is supported by the idea that their manner of work shows confident adjusting approach to client and not the other way around (it is more suitable for high school students). Thanks to the experience gained on the job, they managed to
get pertinent observations on strategies appropriate for a particular group of students in accordance to their age and psychological needs.

We can say that a preference for using several models of intervention places experienced counselors (second and first degree in teaching) in the eclectic model, on the level of theoretical integration which require the counselor to master at least two theories before trying to make specific combinations (Lazarus and Beutler, 1993).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

We believe that these results support the understanding of the importance of carrying out educational and vocational guidance from a constructivist perspective by school counselors, as a support for career decision making among teenagers, specifically on the factors that influence their decision or difficulties which they encounter when they need to choose a future profession.

We want to promote the idea that constructivist career counseling activities are designed to meet students’ needs and expectations to achieve success professionally and socially. The role assumed by a specialist from this perspective and the skills he holds in order to design and implement the constructivist counseling model can be a proactive one, with beneficial results on everyone involved: student satisfaction, personal satisfaction on work efficiency. Statistical data confirmed initial assumptions, the study’s objective being achieved. Guidance and counseling activities in schools imply collaboration, and teamwork which involve all partners in the educational act whose mission is to create a “bridge” between students, parents and teachers in order to sustain effective cooperation between school, family and the community.

R. Walsh ("Philosophical Counseling Practice" in Janus Head Winter, Trivium Publications Amherst N.Y. 2005) describes philosophical counseling as an interaction between a professional philosopher and a client who wants to understand his attitude to life, to himself, as well as the consequences of his own actions. Based on this idea, counseling activities aim at assisting the client to develop a reflective attitude towards self-knowledge and to initiate the process of fulfilling his potential as a strategy to facilitate professional and social success.

Besides thorough training, the counselor should possess the skills to understand each person’s particular situation, to demonstrate that he/she has the ability to reconfigure the counseling act each time in accordance to the needs, characteristics and expectations of each client. Innovation, creativity, and the ability to re-think each situation represent an analytical approach, a commitment to identify opportunities for the client’s career development.

From this perspective, the identification of the specialists’ perception on the role they must take on and the skills they must develop reflects their focus on a certain type of action.

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