

Educational Counseling Approach for the Romanian Educational System

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Abstract

Romanian education has gone through massive changes over the last two decades, first shifting from a closed-market economy to capitalism and then trying to adapt to European Union Policies. At the same time, after the 2007 EU adherence, the country also witnessed demographic and economic turbulences. Combined, all these factors have had influences on education and on the labor market. This paper tries to present professional counseling as one of the solutions for improving educational performances and access to the labor market. Career counseling and schooling guidance are discussed as the approaches which can help youngsters better manage their professional lives, from choosing the right school or university to follow, up to finding the proper workplace. The main limitations of the paper reside in the lack of specialized scientific literature on which to base the assumptions and create a sound methodology. In this case, the paper resumes to theoretically presenting an educational counseling approach that might be implemented in Romanian educational institutions for the benefit of pupils.

Keywords: *counseling, performance, higher education, Romanian educational system.*

JEL classification: I2, J1, J6, O1, P2

1. Theoretical Background

Romania has witnessed deep changes over the last couple of decades (Ignat et al., 2014; Năstase et al., 2013), beginning with a slow and still continuing shift from a closed market economy towards a free market economy, up to the country's inclusion in the European Union in 2007, to name but the two major highlights. The changes have led to more liberalization, commercialization, foreign investments and internationalization (Joia, Huidumac-Petrescu, 2012), with widespread effects on the society as a whole (Stavre, 2011), which, however, according to several researchers, is still looking for sustainability, wellbeing and bridging the gap towards developed

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economies (Buşoi, Istocescu, 2009; Marinescu, Jora, 2013; Pop et al., 2012). Under such conditions, the educational system itself could not have remained untouched, especially when the country has witnessed major demographic (Bărbulescu, 2010, 2013) and mediatic (Roşca, 2014; Stavre, 2013) modifications that have applied pressure on the system of moral values (Drămnescu, 2014).

First of all, as Sadlak (1994) puts it, the ignition for change came from the fact that the educational system escaped the communist rule. During that “particularly despotic regime”, the role of education was reduced to the “glorification of the regime” (p. 13). Lower and higher education were fitted into the communist economic system. Once with the change of this system, education had to change as well, so starting with 1990, Romanian science, overall, has been witnessing a series of reforms, aiming at a reorientation towards capitalism, which brought the need of restructuring for the end goal of improving performances (Aftene, 2012).

The turbulent times of post-communist education are spotted by Hatos (2012). A study made on 4500 Romanian citizens born before 1985 helped the author confirm the observations of past works, namely that the socialist rule, with its leveling of classes, had a negative impact on the probability of graduation. Since this had to change with the fall of the regime, Hatos believes that the transition to capitalism was treated as an excellent occasion for making experiments on the impact of various public policies on education.

Then came the Bologna Declaration of June 1999 and, with the European integration in hindsight, after ten years of capitalism, Romanian education saw itself on the path of moving towards a student-centered approach and adapting itself to the European Higher Education Framework (Vlădescu, 2012). The shift from communism to EU-capitalism also meant a transition from a restrictive model to a future-based model that tries to place the student at the heart of its action. Under such circumstances, there comes as no wonder that the integration of the European model is viewed as an environment that was needed for evolution. Several pinpoints can be highlighted as steps towards progress: the already mentioned student-centered education and the implementation of the Bologna Model in what concerns higher education, and the implementation of the decentralization policy in lower education as part of the Quality Management assurance process (Enăchescu, Trapiel, 2014). Romanian education is on the way of implementing decentralization, a move that would diminish the intervention of government and give more authority to lower-education institutions themselves. This should raise the efficiency of the pre-university system by encouraging schools to take more responsibility in responding to the needs of local communities (Enăchescu, 2011).

2. Career development

Such changes start making professionals in the educational system acknowledge that counseling can play an important role in career development. Career development in itself is a life-long process, as is career-related counseling (Seligman, 1980). Kolo (1999) defines career as a combination between work, education and leisure that never ceases to exist during one's life.

We can compare this with what happens in the market economy with the organizations that want to develop. The formulation and implementation of flexible strategies, which adapt rapidly to market changes, open a new perspective in approaching competitive advantage. This is not a mere application of generic strategies, but represents the exploitation of many factors (resources, most of the times) in a unitary framework (Dima, 2013).

Career counseling means the totality of services and activities delivered for assisting people (whatever their age, job, or path) to make choices in their careers and manage these latter ones. Szilagyi and Paredes (2010) claim that such services have originated in the United States of America in the educational sector, and that post-decembrist Romania follows the same path on its way to professionalizing this kind of offerings. It seems indeed, as several other researches prove, that counseling started to become an issue in the late 1890's America, being a mix of diverse disciplines like education, psychology and sociology (Smith, 2001; Aubrey, 1982). Still today, counseling is often seen as an educational service for providing solutions to individuals, pairs, groups or institution facing problems (Stockton et al., 2010).

Counseling involves at least two parties: the specialized professional (the counsellor) and the person or institution requesting technical aid (the counselee/customer, or the advised) (Aalfs et al., 2006).

One can easily be confused by the ubiquity of counseling. Counseling exists wherever humans are in need of advice for a better life, hence its widespread diffusion. Career is often misled with the working history of an individual, but, as pointed in Kolo's definition, career is more than that: next to job, it also includes life-long learning and spare-time activities. It is also related to what we call individual, but also organizational values. Each of business philosophies stems from the common aggregate of individual operating philosophies and individual sets of values that are held by each and every member of an organization. This inevitably raises awareness of the fact that values can also be held at group level (Șerban, Vasilache, Bărbălu, 2014).

One's employment performance depends on how fulfilled a private life he or she has. Therefore, in the grander scheme of things, career counseling can actually extend to wider areas of life, from marriage, family, relationship, mental health and divorce counseling up to vocational or educational counseling (Egbe-Okpenge, Igbo, 2013). For the purpose of this research, however, the narrow sense of career counseling will be used, which is the one particularly related to employment.

Even so, career counseling is widespread, starting with helping individuals choose their career and finishing with assisting them in managing it. Career counseling is often split on three interlaced levels: employment counseling, career planing, and career development.

Employment counseling helps individuals clarify their short-term goals regarding employment, which means to understand the background of a job and to develop the necessary skills for applying for it (from writing a CV to training the skills needed in an interview with the potential employer). Though wide-spread,

employment counseling finds a particular niche within schools and universities, as offering help for choosing an appropriate job/career to pupils and/or students who have recently graduated or are about to graduate may prove useful. In a recent survey-research, Renn et al. (2014) investigate the role of mentor career support for university students. The results show that offering specialized employment counseling to students positively influences student attitude towards job finding: once, students feel more motivated to search for a job and, second, they easier visualize their careers. Such effects have implications on both personal and global level. The employment-market itself benefits from the pro-active approach of students, while the latter ones have more chances or hopes of making the smooth shift from the university desks to the labor market, which is so often brought into discussion by politics. Though not mentioned directly, it can be assumed that employment counseling first motivates students to have a job and then determines them to actively search for that job, which, at the other end, should leave to diminishing governmental unemployment figures. Determination was brought into discussion by Renn et al. (2014) through the concept of “self-defetism”. The authors show that, in helping them accurately visualize their future, counseling keeps students away from falling in the pit of defetism and resemnation, which may come around especially after several unsuccessful attempts to get a job.

Career planing aims at helping individuals identify the best route for developing their career. It includes managing the necessary resources and action requirements for individuals to achieve their career goals. Therefore, career planing is often presented as the identification of the optimum way of developing a work career.

Career development is seen by Hoekstra (2011) as the evolution of internal career. This means adding roles/jobs to one’s already existing career. In most cases, career development is also assimilated to a chronological succession, i.e. that the employees succesively search for better roles/jobes during their lives. Job rotation is a reality often met within multinational enterprises. In this case, career development involves the process of learning and adapting to the specifics of the new job, even if with the same employer, but different as skills requested.

Career development includes a multitude of stages, which most of the time are equivalent to the stages of evolution of the employee. One gradually develops at work, and this personal improvement is doubled by applying for a higher-level job. Counseling for the career development has to occupy a middle position between the personality traits of the employee and the societal/employment demands, with the aim of helping the individual benefit from the opportunities which arise for him/her to access a better job position. Societal demands can mean virtually anything that may have influence on one’s job career, like psychological, sociological, economic, educational factors etc.

3. Psychopedagogical counseling

As education is part of one's career, career counseling is often interlaced with educational counseling. Counseling pupils or students can prove to be a key in making the right choices for finding a good career pathway. Therefore, in the overall counseling scheme, educational counseling is of particular importance. Educational counseling can be split in two major fields of interest: Psychopedagogical counseling and Schooling guidance.

Psychopedagogical counseling is a qualified approach, scientifically-organized, which allows providing specialized assistance to those people involved in the educational process and who encounter certain impediments (pupils, students, teachers, professors, parents, decision-makers etc.) Assistance is so wide-spread that it can cover mainly everything from collaboration and communication between parties up to issues such as supervision, curriculum, or the identity of educational institutes (Pope, 2004). Psychopedagogical counseling has become a matter of such importance in Western society that it is now viewed as a totally distinct approach (Baskin, Slaten, 2014). McMahon et al. (2014) explain this level of significance through the societal and economic developments that have fueled the demand for social and educational equity during the 21st century and which have led to an environment in which schooling success was targeted for all students. In such a context, counseling was seen by Hill (1964) as an idea of bringing worth to the pupil and helping him find his own path to become independent. However, given that the improvement of student's performance is a sum of several factors, including not only the relationship between professor and student, but also public educational decisions or family values, psychopedagogical counseling can be provided to all the stakeholders with influence on students. As such, counseling can have a vast array of beneficiaries, as well as several orientations.

Schooling guidance aims at the personal development of pupils/students and at their endowment with the necessary knowledge and abilities for them to be able to manage their own educational (and, later, professional) path. It must help scholars become critical self-reflectors and make the right decisions for themselves (Guiffrida, 2005). Schooling guidance is of particular importance in the overall psychopedagogical counseling picture because it is believed that at the stage of their lives when they are aged between 15 and 24, youngsters start experiencing with employment alternatives (Egbe-Okpenge, Igbo, 2013). The awareness of scholars towards the need of having an occupation after the end of their studies gradually increases during their teenages and it often also influences the choice of the higher-education specialization: pupils opt for one university degree or another based on the career they are dreaming of. Chircu (2014) believes that, right now, the number of Romanian scholars who show confusion towards the choice of the appropriate university for them is on a rise. At this stage, the counselor helps the scholars comprehend the realities of the labor market and assists their decision-making about

what profession they would like to have. At the same time, it is recommended that the counselor also insists on instilling sound working ethics with the scholars. Working habits are shaped around this age, so it is a proper moment in life for youngsters to be made aware of the importance of industriousness, as their behaviour now will be reflected during the rest of their lives at the job.

The success or failure in the future career largely depends on decision-making (Vlăduțescu et al., 2015). From this point of view, schooling guidance aims at instilling pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills for them to be able to manage their own educational and professional routes, which also means guiding them to identify the areas of labor that best suit their personality. Acknowledging this fact lets us make the following statement: that schooling guidance is at least bi-directional, having to main goals: once, as read earlier, to help pupils become aware of what kind of job would suit them better and, second, to endow them with the know-how needed to cope with the challenges of job-requirements. Better told, counseling has to make pupils acknowledge just how important industrious learning and acquiring knowledge can be for their future.

Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) find out that adding one extra counselor to a school reduces the misbehavior of pupils and improves school performance by at least one percentile point. While figures might vary between quantitative researches, the value of Carrell and Hoekstra's study lies within its ability to clearly demonstrate the effects that professional counseling can have on educational achievement. Moreover, the authors do not only resume to investigating the inputs on pupils' performance, but they also extrapolate the findings on teacher's output. By doing this, they demonstrate that the increases counseling brings to pupils' performance strongly and positively influence teacher performance as well.

One of the study's recommendations is that counseling is a better approach in tackling school management problems than hiring additional teachers. The authors give the example of class size. Traditionally, the fastest decision school managers make for tackling too high numbers of students in a class is to employ additional teachers. This is related to the hope that splitting classes allows teachers to work with smaller groups, which would mean that teachers can give more particular attention to each and every individual in a group. Giving more one-to-one attention to the pupils is seen as a good way of increasing learning performance.

However, Carrell and Hoekstra's show that this isn't the only solution which can be found, but that, even if keeping large-sized classes, counseling can help them improve, coming as an external motivation to the usual practice.

4. Further perspectives and recommendations

Counseling has got many features and orientations, a couple of which of particular importance: educational counseling and employment counseling. The two can be treated either independently, or together, thanks to their close profile. As could be seen earlier, one of counseling's characteristics is that it helps individuals to access higher paths in their careers, be it a pupil who would like to choose an

appropriate university degree for his/her interests or profile, a university graduate who would like to seal a job, or an employee wishing for a progress in the career. Viewed from the employer's perspective, counseling has also got a major role, with researchers encouraging Romanian companies to make use of educational and scientific resources (Pamfilie et al., 2014), amongst which the human resource composed of pupils and students can be remembered.

Given the complexity, counseling is widespread met: professional services can be found in schools, universities, companies or in businesses specializing on delivering counseling to third parties. For higher efficiency, those "hotspots" ought to sign collaboration agreements with the aim of insuring coherence and continuity of counseling services. Ideally, a pupil would be counselled throughout his whole life, for being helped to choose the suitable university, then the suitable job and the appropriate strategy for growing at the job.

The Romanian educational system and labor market should allow individuals to improve their skills and knowledge so as to adapt to the turbulences of a market economy still finding itself in a long transition. Romanian society, as a whole, goes through rather difficult times, socially and economically as well, with education mostly underfunded (Buşoi, 2011). The country, being hit by its most severe crisis of the past half century (Cace et al., 2011a), was pushed into recession as were many other member states of the EU (Cace et al., 2011b). Romanian citizens faced high pressures which led many of them, unable to find a job in the country, to go abroad with the hope of finding employment necessary to live their lives. According to unofficial figures, around three million Romanians are now working outside the country, not few of them leaving their children back home with one parent or even none of them, but in the care of relatives. Since family and school are the main drivers of the socialization process (Anastasiu, 2011, 2012; Cioviică et al., 2011), not being able to enjoy them properly can cause stress for the children and teenagers; unaccomplished family lives can lead to many youngsters withdrawing school, with severe implications on their employment horizons. Above that, the school per se, as an institution that makes community function properly (Stăiculescu, Lăcătuş, 2013), is also affected.

Disadvantaged groups have to be included in the society, and Arpinte et al. 2010 believe that social economy groups such as NGO's, Mutual Aid Organisations, unions or cooperatives have to apprehend the situation and make decisions accordingly. At European Union level, where Romania is now member of, the fight against social exclusion is a hot topic on the agenda (Achimescu et al., 2011). Cascading this focus from EU-level to country-specific level, after 2007 Romania faced a paradox: on the one hand side, with the opening of the labor market, parents went abroad to find work and left their children back home, and, on the other hand side, more and more community inclusion programs were directed towards the country to help those youngsters in need (Nicolăescu et al., 2012).

Professional schooling and employment counseling can become one of the projects of success in Romania. However, in order for this to happen, a more structured approach is needed. First of all, it is important for all stakeholders in the

society to acknowledge the utility of this kind of counseling. First of all, the counseling centers (either we talk about centers opened within schools, universities or companies, or about independent, business-like centers) have to employ qualified personell with wide specialized knoweldge, either they are psychologists, sociologists, or teachers within the degree that their pupils follow. Such an interdisciplinary model might prove its effectiveness as the needs of the counselees may be better understood and, where one counselor might not see a solution, another one might do. A counseling center can be viewed as a project that has its own culture and that needs its own professional leadership and management for being successful (Năstase, Barbu, 2011). Therefore, the members of the center should have, amongst others, the goal of improving decisional communication – if this happens, the parties involved can make better choices (Dima, Vlăduțescu, 2012; Năstase et al., 2010). The most important would be when optimal communication within the center leads to improved counseling services. In a knowledge-based economy, where leaders and managers have a vast access to information (Năstase, Hotăran, 2011), this opportunity has to be materialized: searching for as much information as relevant and then using it to the benefit of the counselees has to become a way of conducting work. Counselors have now got to be proactive: once the opportunity identified, they have to access information, share advice amongst each other and offer the best solution possible for youngsters to choose their career path. This kind of work justifies the internal architecture proposed earlier in this text for the Romanian counseling centers: being somewhere at its beginning, educational and career counseling still have much to offer to the local society, with many of its benefits still waiting to be found out and proposed to the counselees. Given the factor of new, one suggestion for grasping the full potential of counseling would be to create interdisciplinary centers where counselees can share pieces of advices for finding the best answer to the needs of counselees. Hence, counseling centers in today's educational system of Romania should be set-up as collaborative networks. The main particularity of collaborative networks, as described by Roja and Năstase (2012), is a higher access to strategic resources. Members of the network communicate intensively and share resources and information amongst each other, thus gaining access to better solutions (Nowicka-Scowron et al., 2012; Roșca, 2011; Vlăduțescu, 2006, 2012). The problem of one pupil can be better solved if counselees of various specializations discuss it in detail, each bringing his own specialized knowledge so that, in the end, they can tailor the best strategy for the pupil to follow. Since information is a component of the communication process (Georgescu, 2009; Smarandache, Vlăduțescu, 2013), a wider access to the former one leads to an improvement of the latter one.

This kind of projects, like setting up (collaborative) counseling centers in schools and universities, might be brought into life if Romania better accessed the Structural Funds made available by the EU for this direction (Cace et al., 2010). Social inclusion and a better access to the labor market are lines of investment which the EU strongly supports, these being two main pillars of the mission of the community. Nevertheless, at this very moment, educational counseling is not yet as

developed in Romania as it could be, but time and context are on its side: in the future not far away, professional counseling services may set foot in lower- and higher-education for bringing better educational performances and, thus, for clearing the pathway to a suitable employment career of the youngsters, especially when EU-policies aim to harmonize internal with foreign policies (Huidumac-Petrescu, Popa, 2014; Savu, 2011), where educational counseling is at a more developed level.

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