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The essence of 'best practice' in career guidance and counselling: Global perspectives, shared realities

From school to unemployment: the consequences of the Covid pandemic on emerging adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in France - Paper presented at the Kobus Maree Symposium, 19 October 2022, Life Long Learning UNESCO Chair Conference, Wroclaw. Valérie Cohen-Scali

Introduction

In the newspaper *Le Monde* of 17 June, 2022, the philosopher Abdenour Bidar was astonished by "*the amnesia that has rapidly set in just two years after the ordeal of the COVID-19 pandemic*" and called for a major national debate to heal the collective trauma.

The aim of this paper is to identify the consequences of the COVID pandemic on the life paths of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are enrolled in youth career centres for 16-25 year-olds in France and draw some lessons to produce better practices.

The Covid crisis exposed the most fragile people to vulnerability. Vulnerability is a risk of harm, the likelihood of being affected by a threat, and of lacking the necessary protection to cope with it (Castel, 2006).

Our hypothesis was that the pandemic led some young adults, (particularly those from disadvantaged or working-class backgrounds), from social integration to the sphere of vulnerability to the sphere of social disaffiliation as Vincent de Gaulejac had already studied in 1990.

Methodology

Participants

23 young people aged 18 to 25 enrolled in 2 career centres were interviewed (mean age: 21.8 years, and standard deviation = 2) in the suburbs of Paris: 14 boys and 9 girls. We chose to study their situation one year after the end of the pandemic in 2022.

The interview guide was as follows:

Starting point: *I would like you to tell me what has changed for you since the COVID pandemic?*

Theme 1: Your educational background

Theme 2: Project during the COVID crisis

Theme 2: The main difficulties of young people in the post-covid period

Theme 3: The needs/expectations of young people in ML today

Theme 4: Attitude towards the future

Theme 5: Developments in vocational integration support

Recruitment of participants:

We spent three days in the career services and met young people who had an appointment with their counsellor and who agreed to meet us. We had an office.

The context of Youth Career Centres:

436 career centres are present in France to enable all young people aged 16 to 25 to overcome the difficulties that stand in the way of their professional and social integration. 1.1 million young people are supported each year by these career centres. Nearly 13,600 professionals accompany them in their job or training search. These centres deal with all integration difficulties: employment, training, orientation, mobility, housing, health, access to culture and leisure.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and processed by thematic content analysis inspired by Hill's (2012) consensual qualitative research.

Results

1/ Main difficulties encountered during the pandemic

- 1.1 Inability to follow distance learning courses (8 out of 23)
- 1.2 Confrontation with death and illness (6 out of 23)
- 1.3 Impossibility of joining a training course (5 out of 23)
- 1.4. Breach of employment contract or work-study programme due to a drop in activity (4 out of 23)
- 1.5 Isolation abroad (1)

	Situation before the pandemic (2019-2020)	Situation just after the pandemic (2021)	Situation 2 years after the pandemic
High school student/student/trainee	20	1	2
Employee	3	1	2
Seeking employment	0	9	11
In search of training or internship	0	12	8

There was a destabilisation of the situation between before and after the pandemic, without any stabilisation.

2/ Future intentions, 2 years after the pandemic

- 3.1. Don't know what to do (13 out of 23): no plans (8) or unclear plans (5)
- 3.2 Stay in the same sector of training (5)
- 3.3 Change direction (5 out of 23)

3/ A typology of post-pandemic courses of action encountered by these young people

1/ Waiting in diffuse anxiety (N=7)

Nothing has happened since school stopped. Vacuity in life, waiting for a job or training. Vague anxiety related to the absence of a rhythm of life, which has not really been found and the absence of clear prospects for a rapid outcome to their situation.

2/ Erratic action/ endless chaos (N= 7)

Various situations (odd jobs, short training courses) follow one another but without any link between them; young people find themselves tossed about according to opportunities. They have no plans other than to work quickly, caught up in the need to survive.

3/ Rationalised reconversion (N=5)

The initial project was often highly invested. But it was swept away because of the direct or indirect effects of the pandemic (e.g. the impossibility of enrolling in a training course in time) and they had to find a new solution, to reorient themselves in another sector, with varying degrees of difficulty and enthusiasm.

4/ Delayed Project with downgrading (N= 4)

The initial project was not abandoned but lost its initial scope, because often planned training courses were cancelled. These young people have "bounced back" while being in more difficult and less enviable situations than they had originally aspired to.

This pandemic experience has shown its negative and destructive effects on situations by destabilising them profoundly. Such crises cause individuals to enter long transitions with an indeterminate outcome but where it takes time to regain past stability.

5/ Mentioned interventions received

Regarding the intervention they received, the young people mentioned:

- **Moral support:** counsellors were very available to stay connected with young people, especially during the pandemic, and this was important for young people.
- **Material support:** financial, but also help with accommodation was needed for young people who had been kicked out of their parental home due to tension and violence.
- **Social support:** the young people expressed their isolation and the fact that the career centre offered workshops allowing them to get out of their homes and meet each other.
- **Psychological support:** Many expressed their discomfort or suffering, but few had access to this.

5/- Lessons to be learnt in order to develop best practices to help these young people

In order to develop best practices and to anticipate what to do to protect oneself from the deleterious effects of crises, counsellors should offer more time to reflect on the experience, to learn from it and to develop skills.

For example, it would have been useful to set up reflective workshops after the pandemic so that everyone could reflect on the experience.

It appeared that crisis situations force individuals to implement new skills, for example to follow on-line courses, to develop self-control, the capacity to seek help, to organise themselves

in order to maintain a rhythm of life, etc. This reflective time would also have allowed young people to express their emotions and share them.

So, career centres for young people must build spaces for reflexivity about experience and not just places where advice is offered. Very little of this goes on in these centres. Counsellors should not only focus their interventions on the future but they should also help with reflections and analyses on past experiences and associated emotions. This would allow young people to co-construct a new representation of themselves, identify their skills and give meaning to their actions.

In view of the crises that are being predicted, it is urgent that career centres anticipate more appropriate forms of intervention. Best practices must be those that take into account the specific context and must therefore be continuously redesigned.

Thank you for your attention.