

## **Preventing adolescence through educational counselling on personal and vocational identity**

Carmen Urpi, María Teresa Mateos Gamarra

*School of Education and Psychology Universidad de Navarra*

**Abstract:** Family members, educators, and counsellors are key agents in accompanying adolescents in self-knowledge and the search for their vocational identity. This accompaniment should begin in stages prior to adolescence so that when they reach this stage, the support received from adults has prepared them to make decisions for themselves, choosing those options that respond to their deepest motivations. Although the current generations of young people have extraordinary technological resources that facilitate their access to higher studies and professional field, they find it difficult in previous stages to lay the foundations for coping with this process. The lack of training and criteria, the difficulty of self-knowledge, together with the ease of peer influence in decision-making, highlight the importance of intensifying personal and professional guidance during this stage of adolescence.

*Keywords: Z Generation, Adolescent Self Identity, Family Guidance, Vocational Counselling.*

## Introduction

Adolescence has been defined as a chapter of crisis, which initiates in its early stage by showing strong hormonal and corporal changes at a physiological level, with intense emotional instability. Crisis evolves into a psychic level in middle adolescence, by touching the affection and cognition of the inner self. Finally, crisis reaches an existential level in late adolescence, the stage of decision-making in which life gains meaning while shaping personal and vocational identity (Bernal et al., 2012). Considering adolescence as a period of crisis, adaptation, and deep changes, it frequently goes along with stress situations due to the efforts that the youngster must do to cope with new personal and social conditions (Enríquez et al., 2009). The instability felt throughout this period can be potentially stressing, and frequently associates with the presence of emotional problems, as these normally relate with major levels of stress (Del Barrio, 2003; Hampel y Petermann, 2006).

Adolescents often feel that they do not have enough resources to overtake the stimulus they must cope with and consider them stressing. Investigations demonstrate that it is not such stressors by themselves what would cause stress, whereas their association to other factors that predispose on minor or major measure to suffer stress episodes. Thus, different studies point out to personality features (Meléndez et al., 2020), resilience and self-regulation (Gaeta & Martín, 2015), and environmental conditions (Domingues et al., 2018; Williams & Cooper, 2004).

Primary evaluation of the event that the adolescent must face triggers a process of secondary appreciation and self-analysis on the necessary resources to face it. If the balance is positive, the process results satisfactory, but otherwise, the perception of lack of resources derives in a degree of unease that facilitates the rise of a certain level of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the same line Aguado (2005) notes that stress response is determined by the interaction of objective environmental conditions, together with personality traits and one's own expectations in handling the situation. The strategies used by women to cope with stress are more associated with effort and emotional involvement, whereas they are more avoidant in men (Morales & Moysén, 2015), who perceived themselves as more capable to cope with stress (Govaerts & Grégoire, 2004).

Based on this, it is reasonable to think that dealing with situations caused by a worldwide emergency such as the Covid19 pandemic can have an impact on the mental health of young adolescents, as they are a particularly vulnerable group, immersed in a stage full of uncertainties and changes. In Spain, the director of the Institute of Psychiatry and Mental Health of the Gregorio Marañón Hospital, Celso Arango, highlights the increase in affective disorders in young adolescents because of the pandemic, especially depression, eating disorders, and self-injurious behaviours (Rodríguez, 2022). Given that adolescence is a critical age for the configuration of personal identity, it is necessary to study the impact of the pandemic on the basic pillars on which this stage is based. Isolation to which young population was subjected forced an exclusively virtual contact among peers, while increasing frustration at the impossibility of being able to live what they were entitled to by age, and projected uncertainty beyond the short-term future. Because of all this, health emergencies have suffered an overflow in the care of adolescents.

At the international level, UNESCO Assistant Director for Education, Stefania Giannini, has referred to the cascading consequences that this situation has had on students whose studies were interrupted or hindered, both abroad and in their own country. The report by the technical team of the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean highlights the impact of this crisis on students, especially on young people who have wanted to continue their studies in higher education and, because of the temporary cessation of on-site education, have seen their expectations cut short. Uncertainty regarding the real duration of the situation, the costs and financial burdens they must bear, the discontinuity of learning and international mobility have affected millions of students (UNESCO IESALC, 2020).

Although stress can be present in any personal area of the individual and affect any facet of life, it has a special impact during adolescence, since the adolescent is aware that he or she must begin to make decisions that, in some way, will determine the course of their lives. In the academic field, therefore, symptoms of stress are frequent when it comes to assuming responsibilities for which they often feel unprepared.

## **Traits of Generation Z adolescents**

Today's teenagers belong to the so-called Generation Z or Gen Z, who lives in a globalized world different from that of their predecessor millennials. Besides, the so-called VUCA environment, an acronym originally coined after the Cold War, referring to the terms Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity, is here to stay. It is an environment of almost instantaneous changes and unpredictable or ambiguous situations to be faced, reinforced by the constant development and progress in the world of digital technology and communication that leads to a lack of knowledge and clarity when making decisions (Ruiz Martínez, 2020).

The difficult circumstances experienced in the face of the pandemic have imposed adaptation to this VUCA environment, marking a before and after in people's lives. The affective, emotional, and organizational revolution generated by this health crisis is testing the capacity to react and adapt to a new environment and a new, yet undefined, normality. Critical situations such as this one reinforces some authors' idea about the impact of the negative perception of environment demands and out-of-control distressing situations have on young students (Zárate Depraect et al., 2017).

Unlike Gen Y teens and millennials, who pioneered the knowledge of a technological world, Gen Z youth were born and raised in an entire digital environment that has favoured a completely new way of shaping personality, because they develop personal and professional relationships in virtual channels (Vilanova & Ortega, 2017). The great challenge that they must face is to form their identity achieving a balance between digital life and real life. Their real life is not prepared for the speed with which they live their digital world, largely due to how their different mentality affects the different areas in which they interact, but also due to the risk imposed by social pressure to show themselves not as they really are, but as they would like to be.

In the search and construction of their personal identity, Gen Z face risks that are a consequence of an intense use of technologies in their different forms of communication and relationships. Isolation can turn them into individualistic young people, with difficulty in establishing personal face-to-face relationships with their peers, outside of social networks, since these accommodate them to a type of simultaneous interaction on multiple screens, in real time and without physical presence (Morduchowicz et al., 2016, p. 13).

The immediacy in the search for information and the constant change of activity hinder adolescents' ability to focus attention. In addition, they handle an excess of information difficult to process, since they do not establish adequate filters to select the correct data and deepen reflection. Furthermore, these circumstances favour impulsivity, which sometimes leads them to extreme situations close to recklessness, as they do not take enough time to analyse the possibilities and to assess the consequences of decision-making. Therefore, they end up transferring and demanding immediacy to those around them in the family, school, work, and social contexts. In short, in addition to the risks inherent to adolescence, they face other risks in the handling of information that can hinder and even divert their personal growth, hence the need for adequate digital education (García Aretio, 2019).

## **The search for personal identity in adolescence**

Adolescence is the stage of great personal questions. In Spain, Enrique Rojas, professor of psychiatry and director of the Spanish Institute of Psychiatric Research, points out the most important decisions that human beings face in their lives: who am I, what do I want to be, with whom do I want to spend my life, what foundations and principles do I choose, what kind of friends do I want to be close to? In short, these are the pillars on which personal identity rests.

According to Siegel (2014), the way adolescent years are lived will have a direct impact on the way life will be in the future, which makes evident the need to accompany adolescents in this transition period so that they can face important decisions with the best disposition, as well as unforeseen events of great impact that take place, such as an illness, an unexpected death, a job layoff, and an economic, health or sentimental crisis. These types of experiences place individuals in front of themselves while the world around them seems to crumble, causing an unfamiliar and stressful environment also for those who gave them security in life.

Adolescents often feel insecure and fear making the wrong decision. Decisions are often accompanied by a sense of stress and worry about the exclusion involved in each choice, fear of failure, and disregard for family expectations. Adolescents have their own dreams, but they do not know how to face them, nor in which direction they should head; hence, does a high degree of academic stress easily appear in investigations related to decisions associated with professional future (Martínez and Díaz, 2009). These episodes of student stress are affected to a greater or lesser extent by the physical or emotional discomfort felt in the rise of other stressors, such as relational problems, learning difficulties, poor academic performance, entrance exams to their chosen career, and family problems or contingencies.

There is no doubt that one of the most important stressors during the last school year is the end of a stage and the decision to opt for a path towards higher education or professional context. During the school cycle, the young are guided by their parents and teachers, but at this point they are faced with having to make a first decision for themselves in order to answer an important question regarding their future. When a decision must be made in the vocational field answering who I want to become and what I want to do for a living, there is additional pressure for a choice that must be made at a young age and projected into the future.

### **Configuration of vocational identity in adolescence**

Throughout adolescence, a series of factors come together to help young people define their vocation, from the development of their cognitive skills and the leap to a new educational cycle to the social expectations that are developing in them (Jara, 2010, p. 138). Among other authors, Krauskopf (1999) identifies vocation with a maximum commitment to oneself, to one's own desires and deepest aspirations. To accomplish this, the young must be aware of their abilities and see how they fit with their already undefined project. Acquiring a sense of responsibility and duty, they commit themselves in the present to certain steps to achieve their goals with flexibility as they move into an uncertain future.

The social and cultural context of each young life has a determining influence on its vocational choice. Economic resources, the influence exerted by family and friends, the situation of the country itself, the prestige of a given career, the transformations in society due, among other reasons, to important technological changes, are factors that generate internally in each individual complex motivations towards a given profession (Dominguez, 2003).

The reality is that some young people, in continuity with the inertia they have carried up to that moment, will make the decision without having a clear criterion. With this behaviour they do not show any preference for one option or another, nor do they show a preference for one school or another. Some even hesitate whether to begin higher education immediately at the end of the school years or, on the contrary, to take the so-called gap year, especially in the Northern European countries and the USA, with the risk of not really knowing what they are looking for during that time, and possibly turning it into a long vacation paid for by their parents. Other young people will face the decision with real anguish and stress due to the lack of clarity and vocational prospects. Finally, for others, the choice will be the result of real reflection, maturity and responsibility that will most likely be the fruit of a long process over time. According to Marcia (1980) and Holland (1985), the young who reach the final stage of adolescence with a real and undistorted identity are much more likely to develop a vocational identity by placing it at the service of a personal project.

As previously said, the young feel that they are making a decision that affects their future and they fear to make a mistake. Their choice is not limited to the strictly academic field, it leads to consider deep and existential issues related to life project. By becoming aware of a decision that will open the doors to a professional future and will undoubtedly have repercussions on personal life, knowledge about oneself is gained and a dream future is visualized that allows one to intuit what kind of person one will be.

Nor does the transition to higher education end at the moment of making the decision and preparing for higher education, but it continues during the subsequent process of adaptation to a new stage of life, with the important changes that this can entail at the affective, cognitive and social levels. Indeed,

entering a higher education institution, often accompanied by an uprooting from the family and social environment, presupposes a higher level of autonomy than in the previous stage to perform tasks such as studying long programs of content, searching for information, taking exams and interviews. These academic requirements may result in a stressful situation that has repercussions in the academic, physical, social, and psychological spheres (Sarubbi de Rearte and Castaldo, 2013; Silva-Ramos, 2020).

Muñoz García (2004) considers the moment of incorporation to the university a stressor that can lead to situations of academic stress due to the cognitive and affective processes that are put into play. The negative perception of the educational environment significantly raises the degree of academic stress, which can become chronic stress and lead to more severe symptoms, such as anxiety, low performance, and insomnia, according to Suárez-Montes and Díaz-Subieta (2015), as well as tension, tiredness, overwhelm, nervousness and restlessness, according to Escobar Zurita et al. (2018), causing a deterioration of mental health that can even lead to depression. Recent studies in China confirm the prediction of depression from academic stress, either associated with anxiety and lack of hope (Zang & Shi et al., 2022), as well as sleep quality and cell phone addiction, especially in high school students (Zhang & Gao et al., 2022).

In these difficult and stressful processes of decision, selection, initiation, and adaptation to higher education, it is important that the young do not forget that they are not alone and have educational support, just as they should not forget that, despite the advice and guidance received, the final decision must be made personally and responsibly; that is, with the necessary preparation.

### **The role of family members in the configuration of vocational identity**

The moment when sons and daughters face the decision of choosing the career, they want to study is undoubtedly a great challenge for parents. There is a majority opinion among authors regarding the importance of the role of the family, as the main factor considered in the choice of professional career (Fernández-García et al., 2016; Torío et al. 2007). According to Keller and Whiston (2008), parental support is more important than their parental action. Young people need to know that their parents are proud of them, to perceive that they trust their decisions and listen to them, being at their side in the process, accompanying and guiding in this special stage of their life that is stressful for them and important for their development and growth in maturity.

It is not only about vocational choice, but also about teaching them to make decisions for life and to acquire the experience they need to do so. This requires time and reflection that parents must respect, while providing them with the tools to reach all the information needed to make decisions by following personal criteria. In moments of doubt when the young are not sure which option to choose, communication with parents facilitates the decision process. Parents help them make their own reflections, which involves a mental effort to convey their doubts and concerns, thus seeing the pros and cons of some options or others.

However, the difficulties involved in the adolescent stage often cause changes in the relationship with the children, so that the accompaniment is carried out without sufficient understanding and patience that such a decision requires. Often, the stress and anxiety of the moment cause irritability and lack of communication between parents and children, so it is important that parents are able to reduce the emotional burden of stress so that communication between them improves and it helps the decision process.

Parental influence on career choice can, therefore, be directed in a positive or negative direction. Advice, information regarding specific careers, suggestions, recommendations, in short, everything that helps to situate them in their own reality, can have a very positive influence. On the contrary, pressure and the imposition of criteria in the decision-making process based on expectations, family traditions, etc., have a very negative influence. Some authors go even further, pointing out that parents may even transfer their own frustrations to their children by expecting them to have the opportunities they did not have or to pursue the career they were unable to do at their time (Cortada, 1977). In this way, the only thing that is achieved is that they may fail by not choosing a career that is in line with their aptitudes, talents, motivation, and personal interests.

In addition to the problems that may arise from education during adolescence, there is the challenge for parents and educators to face this stage of life in a different and often unfamiliar way. This is largely because children are part of the new generations that have been born in a globalized and technological world, which has little or nothing to do with the environment in which they grew up. Often, parent's knowledge of this process is limited, especially in the face of the technological challenge ahead of them. For this reason, the help of vocational guidance is essential, as well as cooperation between the different agents involved in education at different levels, such as teachers or vocational counsellors.

However, although the family plays an important role in the decision-making process, the fundamental weight corresponds to one's own personal conviction, which is reached after an adequate vocational orientation. In this sense, some authors argue that knowledge of personal aptitudes and abilities has more influence than the family (Méndez, 1993; Ruiz Cuéllar, 1992), hence the importance of seeking the best strategies for an adequate vocational counselling (Sastre, 1995). Likewise, an active attitude on the part of young people allows them to assume their own responsibilities and not delegate the decision to others, since in this way they would not be able to influence their own learning (Hervás Aviles, 2006).

In short, starting with the necessary support from the family, school and society, young people need professional means to provide vocational guidance in order to undertake on their own the personal and professional project they really want to develop.

## **Educational Counselling on the construction of vocational identity in adolescence**

Educational counselling, in general, has as its primary objective to advise, accompany and guide the young in making personal decisions even before the choice of higher education. It is essential to help them learn to make decisions on their own, in order to face the risks and mistakes they may make during the process of personal decisions that affect their future life.

Vocational guidance helps the young person to identify the main difficulties they may encounter at the end of the school stage and to face the process of choosing higher academic or professional studies; it helps them to reflect on what measures can facilitate this process, after becoming aware of what they like, what they dream of and where they would like to see themselves in a few years' time. The aim of vocational guidance is to achieve better effectiveness in career choice, for which it is essential that the choices young people make consider their interests and abilities. Basically, vocational guidance helps in self-knowledge and in discovering the true meaning of one's own life, so that one can be in the best position to adapt to changing circumstances and environments, traumatic events or resource constraints caused by global changes (Anderson 2015).

Studies show that one of the problems young people encounter when opting for a particular career is the lack of knowledge of their personal talents. Clifton and collaborators (2006) define talent as a natural pattern of thought, feeling or behaviour that is recurrently and productively applied. In line with the ideas of Gagné (2000), other authors differentiate the concepts of endowment and talent, alluding to the fact that the former refers to innate abilities that an individual has spontaneously, while talents involve concrete, effective and outstanding performance, the basis of which is a specific ability that has been systematically developed (Alegría et al., 2010).

Such talents facilitate in the young person the repetition of acts in natural ways that often lead to the achievement of success in the actions undertaken. This self-knowledge increases the chances of success in deciding regarding the educational option chosen. A priori, the young have no experience in the world of work, nor do they know how the labor market works; therefore, they need orientation through the advice and guidance of both parents and educational agents. By means of different programs and strategies, they can help to objectively assess whether an option is compatible with abilities and talents as much as it is with professional goals, in order to avoid an imbalance that leads to failure. As some authors have pointed out, the fulfilment of these objectives is closely linked to the principles of guidance: prevention, development, social intervention, and empowerment (Álvarez Rojo, 1994; Martínez Clares, 2002; Rodríguez Espinar, 1998).

Psychopedagogical guidance, as Bisquerra and Hernández (1996) point out, carried out through programs based on scientific and philosophical principles, is not limited to the strictly academic sphere, but, on the contrary, is an aid to personal development when, on the one hand, it acts as a preventive measure against the possibility of certain problems arising and, on the other hand, it promotes development in the different cycles of life. Prevention is essential to avoid situations of failure and dropping out of school. From the moment the young are aware of the skills they have, the risk of a wrong decision decreases. In relation to prevention, Conyne (2004) stresses the importance of proactively anticipating problems that may arise, with the aim of reducing risk factors in certain groups, as well as their frequency rate. To this end, it is important to take the environment and unfavourable contextual conditions into account.

This can be approached in a positive way by helping the young person to implement coping strategies in situations of difficulty and stress, while at the same time learning new ways of communicating with them through the advances that technology offers. A study carried out with Peruvian adolescents and pre-undergraduates shows how the implementation of these coping strategies, especially those focused on emotions and problem solving, allows them to achieve higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being (Urbano, 2022).

In short, vocational guidance should be focused primarily on self-knowledge through various aspects that are common to every human being. As an objective, it seeks on the one hand, to guide in the discovery of the personal mission or reason for existence, from which to define roles that project a vision of the future, as well as to establish goals and objectives that make this vision possible and a reality. On the other hand, vocational guidance seeks to get the young to reflect on what they like, what values, skills, and personal aptitudes they have for personal life project, as well as to recognize which values, they should work on to turn them into strengths and to become a more confident and effective young person (López and Louis, 2009). Placing the person at the centre of all decisions enhances the orientation based on strengths and values on which to rely when building and developing the life project throughout life, always from self-knowledge, confidence, illusions, dreams, and goals.

## **Conclusions**

Today's young people have in their hands a great potential to be able to develop in the globalized world in which they live; however, the generation gap together with parental overprotection, makes them a generation that somehow has been prevented from flying alone and in which the number of young people with stress indexes increases alarmingly. During adolescence, the presence of different stressors together with other conditioning factors favors the appearance of anxiety and stress symptoms, which can evolve into more important pathologies when a good management of emotions and associated behaviors is not achieved. Emotions are a warning signal of an event that occurs in a close environment and predisposes for action.

The individuality of the young person together with the richness of the personal being confer to the educational guidance multiple opportunities of intervention aimed at the empowerment of the young in the face of possible doubts, limitations or insecurities that arise in decision-making. Full personal development is achieved on the basis of a growth and maturity that involves the different dimensions of the human being: physical, aesthetic, emotional, cognitive, affective, social, ethical-moral, spiritual. In the integrated development and formation of all these dimensions, guidance is understood as an interdisciplinary science that seeks the development of the individual in all areas, concretized in a particular way in each given context. Although educational guidance is a process applicable to any person throughout his or her life, in young people it acts mainly at a preventive level, helping them to plan, to know themselves and their context.

Although the current generations of young people have extraordinary technological resources that facilitate their access to higher studies and professional field, they find it difficult in previous stages to lay the foundations for coping with this process. The lack of training and criteria, the difficulty of self-

knowledge, together with the ease of peer influence in decision-making, highlight the importance of intensifying personal and vocational guidance during this stage of adolescence.

Family members, educators and guidance counselors are key agents in accompanying the young adolescents in self-knowledge and search for their vocational identity. This accompaniment should begin in stages prior to adolescence so that when children reach this stage, they feel supported by adults in such a way that they are prepared to make decisions for themselves, opting for those options that respond to their deepest and most personal motivations. The illusions and dreams that every young person has allow the professional project to be part of the personal project; in this way, it is when the former is an integral part of the vital project that adolescents begin their path in the right direction.

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