

Promoting Vocational Development: Methods of Intervention and Techniques Used in the Italian Context

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Abstract. This article describes a Master Educator Series designed to help educators in Italy design and implement comprehensive vocational guidance curriculum. In this “Master Educator” training, a variety of vocational development models and theories are presented. The goal is to provide a broad range of skills in assessment and intervention strategies to prepare educators for developing the curriculum that best fits their unique context. Five curriculum examples are described. Each of these interventions is built around a vocational development topic, including: providing individualized feedback, improving social relationships and connections, using written exercises, and providing mastery and vicarious experiences.

Résumé. Promotion du développement vocationnel: méthodes d'intervention et techniques utilisées dans le contexte italien. Cet article fait la description d'une Série à l'usage des Maîtres en Education conçue pour aider des éducateurs en Italie à concevoir et mettre en application un programme d'études en orientation professionnelle. Dans cette formation de Maître en Education est proposé un éventail de modèles et des théories du développement vocationnel. Le but est de fournir une large gamme des qualifications requises dans les stratégies d'évaluation et d'intervention pour préparer les maîtres en éducation à construire le programme d'études qui convient le mieux à leur contexte particulier. Cinq exemples de programme d'études sont décrits. Chacune de ces interventions est établie autour d'une question de développement vocationnel comprenant les éléments suivants: fournir une rétro-action individualisée, améliorer les relations et les contacts sociaux, utiliser des exercices écrits et procurer des expériences de maîtrise grâce à des simulations.

Zusammenfassung. Förderung der beruflichen Entwicklung: Interventionsmethoden und Verfahren in Italien. Dieser Artikel beschreibt ein Fortgeschrittenen-Ausbildungsprogramm aus Italien, das Lehrer darauf vorbereitet, umfassende berufliche Beratungskonzepte zu entwickeln und in Lehrpläne umzusetzen. In diesem Aufbaukurs werden verschiedene Berufswahlmodelle und -theorien vorgestellt. Ziel ist die Vermittlung einer breiten Auswahl von Kompetenzen für Eignungsdiagnostik und für Beratungsstrategien, um dadurch die Lehrer dazu zu befähigen, Lehrpläne zu verfassen, die optimal in ihrem speziellen Arbeitskontext passen. Fünf Beispiele für solche Lehrpläne werden vorgestellt. Jeder dieser Unterrichtsentwürfe befasst sich mit einem ausgewählten Berufswahlthema: Bereitstellung individueller Rückmeldung, Verbesserung sozialer Beziehungen und Verbindungen, Verwendung schriftlicher Übungen, Bereitstellung von Einübungserfahrungen und von stellvertretenden Erfahrungen.

Resumen. Facilitando el Desarrollo Vocacional: Métodos y Técnicas de Intervención utilizadas en el Contexto Italiano. En este artículo se describe un Master para Educadores diseñado para ayudar a los educadores de Italia a diseñar y aplicar un currículo comprensivo de orientación vocacional. En este programa de formación se presentan una variedad de modelos y teorías sobre el desarrollo vocacional. La finalidad es facilitar la adquisición de una gran amplitud de habilidades de diagnóstico y de estrategias de intervención que permitan a los educadores desarrollar el currículo que mejor se adapte a su contexto particular. Se describen cinco ejemplos de intervenciones, cada una de las cuales gira en torno a un tema relacionado con el desarrollo vocacional. Estos incluyen:

facilitar retro-alimentación individualizada, mejorar las relaciones sociales y el establecimiento de vínculos, utilizar ejercicios escritos, y proporcionar experiencias de aprendizaje vicarias.

The world of work continues to change as the result of escalating economic globalisation and technological advancements. As a result, the transition from school to work continues to become more difficult as the range of skills and dispositions needed to compete for desirable occupations increase. Traditional person-environment fit models may no longer be adequate because vocational guidance programming for youth must become more comprehensive in scope. Rather than focusing on matching person characteristics with viable occupations, vocational guidance must intervene in helping individuals develop a broad range of skills that can be applied in a variety of occupational settings. To become more comprehensive, vocational guidance programs must offer learning opportunities designed to help develop the basic academic skills as well as the vocational and interpersonal competencies needed to adapt and be successful in any number of occupations (Resnick & Wirt, 1996). And it is likely that expanding vocational guidance to address these broader areas of youth development help young people develop the cognitive and emotional capacity necessary to be effective in making a wide range of school-to-work-to-life transitions (Solberg, Howard, Blustein, & Close, 2002). The American School Counseling Association also concurs that to become comprehensive, vocational guidance programming for youth should attend to the academic, career, and personal/social development domains (American School Counseling Association (ASCA), 2003).

Currently, teachers in Italy are responsible for providing vocational development activities with little or no training. This has resulted in a recent surge in interest in vocational guidance and a proliferation of initiatives by various agencies and diverse professionals. A recent survey of these various intervention options found a wide range of offerings. While some agencies offer short, sporadic, and “last-minute” interventions, others use “clinical”, psychometric and psychological procedures (Soresi, 2000).

As adolescent youth begins to make important personal decisions in response to peer and family pressure, youth, in Italy, must also begin to make important vocational decisions as they prepare to leave middle school and need to choose from a number of high school options. Rather than inform and “support” individuals faced with decisional dilemmas, the approach is to design interventions that help young people improve their ability to become more active in making vocational and personal decisions (Soresi, 2000).

To address their vocational training needs, the Regione Veneto of Northern Italy has provided funding to support the creation of a Master Educator Series. The two-year program focuses on helping teachers to learn how to gather survey information to analyse their students’ situations, detect as early as

possible those who are at greater risk of struggling with school/career choices and demonstrating school maladjustment, and implement psycho educational curricula designed to prevent decision-making, academic, and personal difficulties (Nota & Soresi, in press; Solberg, 2004). The 650 hours of training were distributed as follows: 250 hours of traditional lectures; 250 hours of laboratory activities, practice lessons, exercises, and supervision; 100 hours devoted to private study; 50 hours for the drafting of a final paper. Evaluation of the training program has indicated an increase in teachers' knowledge as well as their ability to carry out educational interventions in their school settings and increased career counselling efficacy beliefs (Nota & Soresi, in press).

The teachers were trained to implement a comprehensive range of vocational guidance activities so that they could apply interventions that are specific to their students' needs. The comprehensive range of guidance activities was drawn from a number of vocational development models. While each model offers its own perspective, variables, and methods, the goal of the Master Educator Series was to provide teachers with an array of methods and intervention strategies. The goal is to empower teachers with the skills needed to analyse their own needs and select intervention strategies that are most applicable to their situation. In this way, young people are more likely to receive a "personalized" vocational guidance program (Soresi, 2000). For each intervention, specific manuals were devised that covered the objectives to be pursued, the techniques, examples and materials to be used in order to simplify teachers' instructions. The teachers were also trained to realize possible adjustments to the interventions, always according to the specific circumstances they were confronting.

Five examples of the types of interventions incorporated into the Master Educator Series are described below. Each of the five interventions incorporated a number of key process ingredients that have been empirically linked to facilitating youth development (Bandura, 1997; Brown & Krane, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985). These process ingredients include: (a) individualized interpretation and assessment of learning and work skills, interests, and aspirations; (b) supportive, caring adults and mentors that offer encouragement; (c) challenging activities that offer mastery experiences that result in individuals experiencing success; (d) activities that require writing one's goal intentions; (e) vicarious experiences that provide peer modelling of how to effectively perform challenging activities; and, opportunities to build stronger relationships between individuals and their teachers/mentors, and peers. In addition, each intervention was evaluated to determine their treatment efficacy.

Choice For The Future: No Problem!

This intervention (Nota & Soresi, 1999) aims at increasing school-career decision levels and was inspired from the research studies on career problem

solving (Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, & Lenz, 1996) and career decision-making (Gati, 1998). These studies emphasized that to make conscious and adequate school-career decisions it is necessary to have, on the one hand, sufficient knowledge about one's own personal characteristics and training and working realities and, on the other, the ability to classify such knowledge as well as adequate and efficacious decisional processes. In the specific case, the 15 didactic units of intervention intended to increase the students' knowledge of themselves with respect to professional interests, professional self-efficacy beliefs, academic abilities and professional values, and professional reality. The objective was also to their increase knowledge with regards to a range of at least 200 occupations and with relation to the characteristics of the professional routes that allow the approach to such occupations. Participants are taught to set themselves a professional goal linked to the knowledge acquired, to identify several options (professional activities) that would allow such an objective to be pursued taking into consideration the information acquired and specific explorations. Lastly, they are taught to choose, through the use of compensatory decisional strategies, the most advantageous of the options they have already identified. To verify the efficacy of the intervention, a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design was used and the instrument *Ideas and Attitude on School-Career Future* (Soresi & Nota, 2001) served as the outcome measure. Results indicated that young persons who had received the *Choice for the future: No problem!* curriculum reported higher levels of self-assurance associated with self-knowledge and academic/vocational reality, and higher levels of commitment to and involvement in choice, as well as confidence in their own decisional abilities (Nota & Soresi, 1999).

First Commandment: I Believe In Myself ... Also Because It Is In My Interest

Drawing from Bandura (1997), this intervention (Nota & Soresi, 2000) favours the adolescents' self-reflection and ability to analyse behaviours and experienced situations, and encourages them to recognize the cognitive processes that are implied in controlling negative thoughts and in decision making, to manage some negative emotional states, to plan and set goals, to select more adaptive ways of analysis and management of difficult situations and choices. It is composed of 14 didactic units and envisages a number of meetings for personalized supervision with each adolescent involved in the intervention in order to verify and support the efforts made to strengthen own efficacy beliefs in a specific area. To verify efficacy of intervention, a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design was used and the questionnaire *How much confidence do I have in myself?* (Soresi & Nota, 2003) was used as a student self-efficacy outcome measure. Results indicated that young people who had

received the curriculum reported higher levels of self-efficacy about their ability to make choices, manage difficult situations, complete difficult, demanding tasks, and be successful (Nota & Soresi, 2000).

Difficulties: No Problem!

The training programme Difficulties: No Problem! (Nota & Soresi, 2004) was inspired in particular by empirical research related to augmenting social and problem solving abilities (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1990). The aim is to strengthen the more general problem solving and decision making abilities. The 15 didactic units of instruction sought to increase participants’ ability to define different problem situations, identify different solutions to the problems described, and choose the most advantageous solution strategies. Opportunities for improving the social skills needed to more effectively manage difficult situations are also addressed. To verify efficacy of intervention, a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design was used. Outcome measures included the instrument *Ideas and Attitude on School-Career Future* (Soresi & Nota, 2001), and a problem-solving and decisional style measure. Results indicated that young people who had received the curriculum reported higher levels of commitment to and involvement in choice, and better problem solving and decision making abilities (Nota & Soresi, 2004).

Assertive Training for Indecisive Students

This assertiveness training program (Nota & Soresi, 2003) focuses on the following four skill areas (Furnham & Rawles, 1994): (a) analysis and description of problematic relational situations; (b) discrimination between adaptive and maladaptive relational styles, which might appear vis-à-vis problem situations, and between the consequences associated with their utilization; (c) coping with difficult situations by resorting to assertive behaviours; and, (d) managing problem situations by resorting to efficacious problem solving and decision making procedures. The 10 didactic units focus on improving students’ decision-making abilities, facilitating a more active search for the information needed to make choices, and establishing a more positive “interior dialogue” regarding one’s abilities. To verify efficacy of intervention, a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design was used and the instruments *Ideas and Attitude on School-Career Future* (Soresi & Nota, 2003) and *Scale of Interpersonal Behaviour* (Arrindell, De Groot, & Walburg, 1984) were used as outcome measures. Also, the participants’ actual ability to manage difficult social situations in a role-play assessment situation was assessed. Results indicated that young people who had received the curriculum reported lower levels of discomfort in assertively coping with several social situations, greater

levels of decision and greater abilities to gather information useful to choice. There were also significant differences found in the number of assertive, passive and aggressive behaviours exhibited by the experimental group (Nota & Soresi, 2003).

Achieving Success Identity Pathways (ASIP)

A final example of an intervention program that was included as part of the Master Educator Series is the ASIP program (Solberg, 2004; Solberg, Close, Metz, 2001; Solberg et al., 2002). One underlying premise of the ASIP program is that one's general ability to manage vocational transitions and decision-making evolves from one's level of "personal agency". Personal agency refers to the degree to which a person feels in control of his or her life course and believes that s/he is able to manage challenges in ways that will result in desired outcomes. Young people who report less confidence in managing academic and social tasks are more likely to engage in avoidance behaviours, depression, anxiety, poor school achievement and other behaviour problems (Smith & Betz, 2002). In addition, young people who are unable to manage academic and life challenges are more likely to demonstrate school difficulty as well as high levels of stress and depressive feelings (Grant & Compas, 1995). The ASIP program is designed as a vocational guidance curriculum that seeks to simultaneously address academic, vocational, and interpersonal development domains. Four of the ASIP curricula include: ASIP Navigator, Hear My Story, Action Theater, and Charting Your Course.

The ASIP Navigator helps young people to define the challenges they experience in making effective school transitions. Conducted in classroom or group settings, they receive individualized feedback in the form of bar graphs that provide them the information they can use to define the range of academic and life challenges they may experience. In addition, young people complete a workbook designed to help them learn more about how they can learn to manage these challenges. The bar graphs address a variety of academic, vocational, and interpersonal areas associated with doing well at school; these include academic self-efficacy, stress and health, connections with teachers, peers, and family, and goal setting. After reviewing and discussing the bar graphs, the young person completes a workbook. Completing the workbook involves an intimate discussion between the educator and the young person about the various issues involved in making effective school and life transitions. Educators share their personal experiences with the young persons and witness their stories and personal challenges. Following the discussion of each workbook section, the young person responds in writing to the questions being posed. Questions range from identifying areas of stress to articulating strategies for creating stronger connections with teachers. The combination of

self-reflection and problem solving offers young people an opportunity to identify success strategies for improving academic and life outcomes.

Hear My Story involves both the educator and the young persons sharing their life stories in a classroom or group setting. The goal is to provide an opportunity for the educator and peers to hear the range of challenges young persons may encounter. By sharing these stories, participant builds stronger connections with both the educator and peers. Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that internalised motivation, e.g. being motivated to attend school because it is enjoyable and/or meaningful, emerges as a result of stronger relationships being established between the teacher and the young persons.

Action Theater includes three activities leading to the creation of live improvisation in the classroom. Action Theater begins by encouraging the participants to work in groups and create a sculpture of the challenges they face. The second activity consists of creating short-plays about their lives and the third, most advanced, activity involves young people writing down challenges and issues that are then used as the cues for acting out. The goal of Action Theater is to help young people understand the social construction involving in the challenges they encounter and the ways they may be able to modify their nonverbal and verbal behaviour to increase the likelihood of experiencing more positive, desirable outcomes. Young people and educators learn that negative experiences result from complex interactions often involving a number of people. They also become aware of how they often respond to cues from others and that by responding differently they may be able to more effectively manage difficult situations.

Charting Your Course is a workbook that helps young people define their academic and life challenges and develop a set of action strategies for improving in one academic area. The final page of the workbook consists of a contract between the young person and educator that identifies the concrete behaviours young people need to adopt.

The ASIP program was evaluated in an urban school environment characterized by young persons highly at-risk of dropping out of school. On average, the young persons involved were from low income backgrounds, entered the 9th grade with reading levels at the 4th grade level, and 50% of them were likely to leave the school before the end of the year (Solberg, 2004). A quasi-experimental method was employed that evaluated the number of classroom periods devoted to the curriculum. A one-way multivariate analysis of covariance was conducted using four levels of curriculum exposure, and end of semester grades and number of credits received served as measurable outcomes. Covariates included early term grades and attendance and these data were collected prior to implementing the ASIP curriculum. After controlling for the effects of early term grades and attendance, the results indicated that young people who received higher levels of exposure to the curriculum were associated with end of semester higher grades and credits received. Using a

four-point grading scale, young people who received 1 or 2 exposures to the ASIP curriculum recorded a grade average of 1.38 while those who received 7 or 8 exposures of the curriculum recorded a grade average of 2.1. For credits, those who received 1 or 2 exposures to the ASIP curriculum recorded an average of 2.05 credits, while those who received 7 or 8 exposures of the curriculum recorded an average of 2.8 credits. Each course was the equivalent of 0.5 credits indicating that high exposure to ASIP curricula was associated with passing two more courses.

Conclusions

The present work illustrates a method of training educators who are serving as vocational guidance operators to conduct a wide range of curricula that helps prepare young people to make choices about their school/career future. This is a particularly delicate task and quite a responsibility for these teachers, as only about 60% of the students seem to be able to deal autonomously and adequately with this choice, while they appear to have high levels of indecision and/or poor motivation to cope with this decisional task (Nota, 1999). In addition, many young persons who experienced difficulty with decision-making and motivation are likely to experience problems ranging from social maladjustment to low self-efficacy beliefs and poor self-regulation. This constellation of problems makes it difficult for these young persons to achieve a positive relationship with their school experience, which undermines their school attendance (Soresi, Nota & Ferrari, in press). Therefore, vocational guidance in school settings must offer preventive programming that helps young people develop the broad range of skills needed to gain greater satisfaction from their school experience (Solberg et al., 2001) and make more effective school-to-school and school-to-work transitions (Solberg et al., 2001). The goal is to help youth maximize their true potential by preparing them with the skills needed to make effective school/career choices leading to desired future goals (Solberg et al., 2002).

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