

Career Counselling with Street Youth

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Background

A variety of programs have attempted to address the career development needs of street youth (*i.e.*, 16-24 year olds who generally have no fixed address, minimal or no formal social support and who usually support themselves through street activities such as prostitution, theft, drug dealing and the like). However, in our review of the literature, it became apparent that no single program addressed the varied needs of these young people. In response to this gap in services, we designed a model for a relatively unstructured program that has the capability to adjust to meet the changing needs of youth. This model was the basis for *Skills Plus*, a pre-employability program for street youth. The core features of the model and program are described below.

Hierarchy of Self-Directed Adaptation

Career development programs are designed to help individuals make transitions from one context to another (*e.g.*, school to work, one job to another job, street to work). In general terms, the desired outcome of these programs is client adaptability within the new environment. At the beginning of a transition, it is generally assumed that clients enter programs because they possess little ability to be adaptable in the new environment.

As clients move from very low adaptability to very high adaptability, *the interventions used to assist them need to change*. The "hierarchy of self-directed adaptation" (Magnusson, Day & Redekopp, 1988), partially illustrated and described below, is our attempt to show the continuum of these interventions.

Adaptability Level	Intervention
Exceedingly High	Personal Innovation
Very High	Self-Help
High	Consulting
Moderate	Formal Instruction
Low	Coaching
Very Low	Advising/Guiding
Exceedingly Low	Intensive Support

Intensive Support. At the beginning of a transition, individuals may lack the resources or capability to take independent action, and often need someone to serve as a direct advocate on their behalf. Such intensive support is usually directive, and involves doing things *for* the clients (*e.g.*, attend to safety concerns, make phone calls). Intensive support, which is conducted on one-to-one basis, helps to develop trust between the client and the intervenor and provides time for the client to become more comfortable with the transition process. With some

clients, this phases lasts only a few minutes; with street kids, three to five weeks is the norm.

Advising/Guiding. As clients become acquainted with the demands of the transition, one-to-one assistance continues but becomes more non-directive and less advocacy-based. This "advising/guiding" is what most people think of as the typical function of the career/personal counsellor. The client here begins to work on self-management skills, the prerequisites for any transition.

Coaching. As the client becomes more adaptable, particularly with regards to the essentials of self-management, coaching (small group facilitation) is introduced. The coaching intervention allows the client to interact with others (the context in which most self-management skills are necessary) while still having the luxury of personal assistance when necessary. Coaching continues to development the client's self-management capabilities and begins to work on personal/career development issues.

The above three levels of intervention attend to the development of skills and attitudes that are prerequisites for formal instructional settings.

Formal Instruction. Formal instruction, which is devoted to the development of specific transition skills and usually occurs in large group settings, becomes an appropriate and cost-effective intervention when the client's self-management skills are relatively strong. The intervenor knows that the client can manage himself or herself and can therefore focus on specific skills need for the transition (*e.g.*, job-specific skills).

Consulting. Clients who have acquired specific skills during "formal instruction" will occasionally stumble or hesitate as they implement these skills in real life. The consulting intervention allows for this by encouraging the client to return to the intervenor for check-ups, encouragement or validation. For example, someone who learns resume-writing skills may return after drafting a new resume on his or her own to have it checked by the intervenor.

Self-Help. As the client becomes comfortable applying his or her skills in the transition environment (*e.g.*, a job, as a post-secondary student), the role of the intervenor changes markedly. Client helps themselves by reading, talking with colleagues, going to seminars and the like. The role of the intervenor becomes one of providing access to or information about resources for clients.

Personal Innovation. As individuals "master" their new environments, they begin to create their own learning mechanisms. This may include experimenting with new strategies/tactics, teaching others, mentoring others or writing to a learning audience. This requires extremely high adaptability--here individuals create new practices and concepts to alter their environment. The role of the intervenor at this level is one of providing encouragement, support and feedback.

Skills Plus

The sixteen week ***Skills Plus*** program for street youth followed the above hierarchy from intensive support to coaching, with only the occasional formal instruction. Our intention was to help street youth develop the prerequisite skills for formal instruction in other locations (e.g., back to school, post-secondary, job-specific training) or for immediate entry-level employment.

The first several weeks of the program were devoted to intensive support. Youth met the counsellors individually on roughly a daily basis. The counsellors' primary motivation at this stage was to develop trust and encourage motivation for the transition. Although intensive support is costly, it paid off in client commitment and a very low drop-out rate.

The amount of time devoted to intensive support was different for each youth. Some required only an hour; some needed daily meetings for five weeks. Those who were ready immediately moved to advising/guiding; those who were not received intensive support as long as they needed it. On average, most street clients were ready for advising/guiding by the third or fourth week.

Coaching began as soon as two or more clients were ready for this intervention. The content of the coaching was entirely client-driven. For example, during a session the clients spoke of the difficulty in having cheques cashed without a driver's licence or other identification. They felt like non-entities without having driver's licences. The counsellors took this as an opportunity to build self-esteem, explore learning strategies and meet immediate needs. They immediately began teaching driver skills so that clients could get their "beginner's permits" and have identification. Similarly, if clients expressed anger during a session, the session would switch to focus on "anger management."

Complementing the counsellors was a group of "advocates" who had been trained to work part-time with the street youth in ***Skills Plus***. Advocates were individuals with a familiarity with street life due to prior experiences but who had worked through their own personal issues. The advocates assisted at all three intervention levels, helped recruit clients, participated in a "triadic counselling" method (a method for increasing communication that uses either two clients and one counsellor or advocate, or an advocate, client and counsellor) and helped clients develop Self-Portraits (see *Creating Self-Portraits* in this volume).

Outcomes

The ability of ***Skills Plus*** to directly meet client needs as they emerged resulted in high commitment to the program. Clients who stayed with the program past the first one or two intensive support sessions generally stuck with it to the end. These clients had far more needs than we anticipated (and we were anticipating the worst), and therefore sixteen weeks was in many cases only enough time to deal with some very basic living needs. For example, one young prostitute with an infant effectively made the transition from prostitute to "talking dirty over the phone" (we tried to look up this role in the DOT to get the proper title, but...). This may not seem like a big leap, but it helped reach a number of goals:

- safety for her baby
- improved care for her baby
- reasonable cash flow
- improved safety for the mother (i.e., avoiding abusive pimps)
- stable living environment with a support network

This woman obviously did not make the transition to a "normal" working environment, but at least the stage is set so that she can more easily effect that transition when ready.

Many of the ***Skills Plus*** successes were similar to the woman's above. Although a majority of the youth returned to school, obtained further training or found employment, these seemed to be less significant than the transitions to better support systems, better living conditions, better communities, and better self-care.

References

Magnusson, K., Day, B., & Redekopp D.E. (1993). Skills are not enough: A concept paper on innovative strategies and services for youth in transition. *Guidance and Counselling*, 8, 4, 6-20.

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