

Youth in the 1990s: Challenges and opportunities for counselling and teaching*

Quite some time ago, UNESCO's Youth Programme undertook a prospective study on Youth in the 1980s. Carried out by thinkers from such varied disciplines as history, philosophy, social science, and journalism, it was remarkably prescient. By decade's end, the general prediction that structures that held young people back from self-expression would be challenged was given dramatic support. From the Berlin Wall to places further to the East it was the so-called "quiet" generation of young students and workers who were the leaders in this unexpected – and unfinished – "spring time of peoples."

What drove these events and what motivated the generation that poured forth into the streets and public squares will long be the subject for scholarly study. What is undeniable is that a longing for freedom, a need for honesty and authenticity, and a revulsion for cynicism are the basic qualities we admire in the young.

Counsellors and teachers – those involved in listening carefully to youth and students – are in a privileged position, in different social and educational settings to catch the anguish and expectations, the hopes and the fears of the next generation. As privileged witnesses to the "adolescent identity crisis," they are also witness to the evolution of social identities for the future.

Young people need role models and mentors. They need examples of successful lives that are based on ethics and service, pain and devotion, passion and energy and not only on the pursuit of material wealth and ephemeral pleasures. Counsellors and teachers are in the "business" of caring. And unfortunately modern, specialized technological societies simply don't care enough. Families, under stress, often fail to provide the basic underpinnings of confident and loving growth.

In a time when more than half of the world's population is below the age of 25, and 30% are between the ages of 10 and 25, of whom 80% live in developing countries, existing patterns of behaviour may well not be valid any more, and it is especially hard for older people to **guide** the young. Problems and their solutions are based on millions of small acts, for which we have to set up examples. Fundamental to the emergence of a new spirit of cooperation within society is the establishment of a sincere dialogue between the various generations.

To change habits and patterns, to promote human solidarity, young people will be the conscience of the planet and their values must reflect respect for Nature and for future generations.

Let me set out some basic points that reflect the approach of UNESCO in this field. Inherent to the concept of counselling is the assumption that it is a **democratic process**, that is, both the counsellor and the counselled are equals **sharing** information and exchanging ideas. Counselling assumes that individuals have the **right** to shape their own destiny and that the relatively mature and experienced members of the community are responsible for ensuring that each person's choice shall serve both his/her own interests and those of the society to which he/she belongs. The role of those who counsel young people is, therefore, not to effect a compromise between the requirements of individuals on the one hand and the demands of the community on the other. It is, rather, to orient young persons toward those opportunities afforded by the environment that can best guarantee the fulfillment of their personal needs and aspirations. **Counselling is, therefore, a pervasive activity in which many persons and organizations take part.** It is afforded to individuals by their parents, relatives and friends and by the community at large through various educational, cultural, industrial, social, religious, and political agencies, and through the mass media. Usually, counselling entails the giving of information that enables young persons to increase the scope of their exploratory behaviour.

Secondly, there is a consensus among those who have studied the problems of young people that the concept of **youth** itself is complex and elusive. In addition to its transitory nature and precisely because of it, youth has its own problems and needs which give rise to legitimate, specifically youth-related demands with respect to adult society. In any given society at a certain historical moment, it is impossible to delve into the problems involved in integrating a nation's youth as a **whole**; rather the analysis must focus on the different kinds of **groups of young people**, subsectors with separate realities according to such factors as their socioeconomic strata of origin, their sex, their residence in the city or the countryside, and their cultural identity. **Counselling must adapt to different socio-economic and cultural situations and take into account specific youth cultural identities.**

Thirdly, recent information from an ongoing survey study being carried out by the United Nations reveals the magnitude of persistent inequalities of opportunity among different groups of young people. Inequalities in education are particularly noteworthy in terms of income of the family of origin and residential areas; differences in education by sex are currently significant only in countries with large rural, indigenous populations. What is particularly alarming is the increase in functional illiteracy (0 - 3 years of schooling) observed among the youngest cohorts in many developing countries and even in some developed countries.

In such situations, the achievement of the right to education and to work must first go through a stage where the severe **inequalities** in this respect, among the various real groups of young people who make up "youth" as an abstraction, are acknowledged. Moving towards the goal of the exercise of this dual right to education and employment implies a principle of **equity**. This means that the business of caring cannot exclude different forms of participation in favour of the formulation of policies and programmes having in view the mitigation of the most exaggerated extremes of inequality and the elimination of the worst forms of need (extreme poverty, illiteracy, open unemployment).

Many of you know also that UNESCO, in order to prepare young people for the tasks and responsibilities that they will have to accomplish in the future, has been actively promoting, through its youth programme, activities to facilitate their participation in the economic, social, and cultural development of their countries. In the present UNESCO programme a *Transverse Theme on Youth* and a *Mobilizing Project* called "Youth Shaping the Future," and touching on all sectors of competence of UNESCO, have been designed as integral parts of the Third Medium Term Plan for 1990-1995.

Two particularly significant actions are foreseen under the *Mobilizing Project*: The creation of an international youth information service, the enhancement of the capacity of national and regional networks of youth institutions, organizations, and research centres to detect youth trends and aspirations. We hope that this new information network at the international level will facilitate the difficult task of counselling and UNESCO stands ready to establish educators' cooperation in this field.

Counselling and teaching of young people pursues the same ultimate goal of helping young people to have access to productive employment and to foster their political participation in the decision-making of public life. Counselling is important in its preventive education role in combating drug abuse, early and unwanted pregnancies, combating the AIDS epidemic, and other social and health problems. Counselling is also the defence of ethical values which make life worth living.

UNESCO believes that educational institutions should educate pupils and students to appreciate the social and economic value of different kinds of work, inculcating respect for those who work and for the working people in general, while at the same time developing the individual's ability to make a sound and free choice of a line of further work and career by the provision of guidance and counselling facilities in institutions and at national levels.

* Adapted from an address delivered at the International Round Table for the Advancement of Counselling, Helsinki (Finland), July, 1990.

Pierluigi Vagliani participated in efforts to create newly conceived youth organizations in Italy after the Second World War, based on voluntary work especially directed towards Southern Italy, the undeveloped part of the country. He was national secretary of "International Civil Service" from 1950 to 1955, then worked for several years as director of the "National Union for the Struggle Against Illiteracy" and organized pilot adult education centres in Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia. Mr. Vagliani joined UNESCO in 1962, first in Africa as a literacy expert, then at Headquarters in Paris, to participate in the launching of the World Literacy Programme. In 1968, he reorganized and gave new focus to the UNESCO Youth Programme. He is now Director of the Division of Youth and Sports Activities. Mr. Vagliani was born in Rome, and he holds a university degree in Pedagogy.

Pierluigi Vagliani a participé à la création de nouvelles organisations de jeunesse en Italie après la seconde guerre mondiale, travail de bénévolat s'adressant particulièrement aux régions sous-développées du pays, au sud de l'Italie. Il a occupé le poste de secrétaire national du "Service civil international" de 1950 à 1955. Ensuite, pendant plusieurs années, il était directeur du "Syndicat national pour la lutte contre l'analphabétisme", mettant sur pied des centres-pilote d'éducation permanente en Calabrie, Sicile et Sardaigne. Monsieur Vagliani s'est joint à l'UNESCO en 1962, d'abord en Afrique comme expert en alphabétisation, puis au bureau-chef à Paris pour participer au lancement du Programme mondial d'alphabétisation. En 1968, il a réorganisé et donné un nouveau centre d'intérêt au Programme de la jeunesse de l'UNESCO. Il occupe actuellement le post de directeur de la division de la jeunesse et des activités sportives. Monsieur Vagliani est né à Rome et détient un diplôme universitaire en pédagogie.