

CHAPTER 5

The Status of Career Services and Credentialing in Colombia from 2010 to 2016

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In Colombia, the academic title of *career counselor* does not exist; however, these functions are within the general position of *school counselor* under the direction of the National Ministry of Education and assigned to educational institutions by regional education secretariats. The present study about the current situation of the process of certification and accreditation of the professional school counselors in the Republic of Colombia is framed by the current state of government in Colombia. Colombia is a country located in the northwestern region of South America and is a democratic state, presided over by a president. It is politically organized among 32 departments, with the capital district being Bogota (Colombia, n.d.).

The centralist system of government of the country determines, to a large extent, the general socio-economic development and the prevalence of counselors, who are concentrated in large cities and mainly in the capital of the republic. Currently, in Bogota, there are approximately 1,200 school counselors governed under two educational charters, Charter 2277 of 1979 and Charter 1278 of 2002. In 2015, 1,015 counselors were appointed in the different regions of the country, reaching a staffing plan of approximately 2,200 school counselors. In private schools, the role of school counselor is mainly assumed by psychologists and educational psychologists, who do not necessarily frame their functions in the category of career services or vocational guidance. With provisional contracts that include administrative or mixed (non-teaching) duties in many cases, it is even more difficult to quantify these professionals accurately.

The Political Constitution of Colombia of 1992 established the National Ministry of Education and entrusts it with the following objective, “formulate the national education policy and establish the qualitative criteria and technical parameters that contribute to the improvement

of quality” (Decree 88 of 2000, Article 3). In relation to the state of certification and accreditation of school counselors in Colombia, it is necessary to make a series of clarifications, including a general description of the education system in the country.

Educational System in Colombia

Education in Colombia is structured in three different levels: pre-school education, primary education, which includes primary and secondary cycles, middle education, and higher education.

- **Preschool:** The preschool level comprises the grades of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and transition, and serves children from three to five years of age.
- **Primary:** Primary is composed of two cycles: the primary includes grades from first to fifth, and the secondary level includes grades sixth through ninth.
- **Middle:** Middle education comprises the 10th and 11th grades. Some international schools offer 12th grade. (National Ministry of Education, n.d.a)

Within this organization, all the primary level grades are considered mandatory. Although each of the 32 departments has their own Secretary of Education, all of them are governed by the same legal parameters of national character framed in the General Education Act of 1994. In 1999 the number of students enrolled in pre-school, primary and secondary education increased to 11.2 million students; however, in 2010 the total enrollment decreased to 10.7 million, even though the total country population in 2013 was 47,121,000 (Barrera, 2014).

Resolution No. 1084 of 1974 established the ratio of school counselors to students at 1:250. For this school population (10.7 million students), the number of counselors would be expected to be 42,800 school counselors. However, in reality the position does not exist in rural or urban schools. Until 2010, there were 877 professionals reported in territories other than the capital for a general population of 42,000,000 inhabitants. The legal requirement is not even met in Bogotá, because for a school population of approximately 900,000 students, there are only about 1,200 counselors, which is a ratio of 1:750.

Origins of Guidance Services in Colombia

Mosquera (2013) reports that, in November 1954, six institutes of Psychology Studies and Professional Guidance were created, because students were failing in their chosen professions. Also, the emergence of modern techniques for full utilization of individual capacities and the demand for staffing to guide young people in the choice of their activities led to the creation of

these institutes. Ultimately, the National Ministry of Education created an office charged with organizing these six institutes. By 1956, Decree No. 2347 established positions to attend to the operation of the new office (Mosquera, 2013). However, Gonzalez (2013) relays that,

school counseling is a fifteen-year-old lady, who according to her birth record was not born in 1974, as some heirs proclaim. Its origins occurred in 1954, and from then on passed through childhood and adolescence, arriving at the 22nd of January of 1974 when the state recognized the “Guidance and School Counseling Service.” (para. 1)

Borja (2015) elaborates on the clinical character of the charge given to this body. The National Ministry of Education created the Guidance and School Counseling Service for the country's educational establishments, considering it to be the most appropriate means to carry out the primary prevention of mental illness, emotional disturbances and psychosomatic disturbances that, at that time, reached high rates. This characterization asserts that body was created more with clinical interests than educational, which caused the hiring of psychologist, among other professionals such as language and occupational therapists, who, until 1994, worked in Diagnostic and Treatment Centers. The Bogota council added functions of career services to the functions previously specified. Interdisciplinary school guidance teams are expected to support schools and communities in coexistence, peaceful solution of conflicts, and career services.

Job Functions

In September 2010, the National Civil Service Commission was called upon to hold an open competition, based on merit, to fill vacancies for school counselors in public schools with people certified in education. The following functions of the counselor were defined:

- School counselors are responsible for professional tasks that, within the framework of the Institutional Educational Project, include the diagnosis, planning, execution and evaluation of student guidance, leading to the full development of the student's personality;
- Creating a culture in which scientific and technical knowledge can be achieved and ethical, aesthetic, moral, citizen values and respect for diversity and individual differences are formed in order to prepare students for useful activity which furthers the human and socioeconomic development of the country;
- It is the responsibility of school counselors to fulfill functions aimed at promoting the balanced and harmonious development of the students' abilities, decision-making abilities, and the acquisition of knowledge;
- Special activities include complementary non-teaching curricular work, based on the interests of the community, to assist parents and students in updating

teaching methods, research on educational matters, meetings with teachers, and other educational, formative, cultural and sports activities; and

- Within the framework of the Institutional Educational Project in public schools, engage in activities sponsored by agencies or institutions in related sectors that have a direct or indirect impact on the team, efficient time management, accountability, conflict and problem solving, communication, negotiation and participation skills. (National Commission of the Civil Service, 2010)

The call made in 2010 specified the preparation requirements for the position as people licensed in counseling, psychology and education, educational psychology or possessing postgraduate degrees in school counseling, educational counseling, educational psychology, or other related titles. Professionals with a degree in psychology, educational psychology, social work, occupational therapy or sociology or with postgraduate studies in school guidance were also eligible to apply. The 1,500 selected counselors were added to the 877 counselors who were currently developing guidance functions in 57 public schools, which meant a total of 1,892 guidance teachers throughout the country (National Ministry of Education, 2010).

At the discretion of some school administrators, all kinds of administrative functions were also assigned, such as supervision of school feeding services and school routes, which literally suffocated the job and decreased the quality of the service. Also, in the bio-psycho-social care area, there are about 30 specific topics which must be monitored with different methodologies, instruments and emphases such as the Biopsychosocial Risk Map (Brunal, 2012). This monitoring requires a large part of the work time in these positions. Vocational guidance is only one of the many functions that school counselors working at the levels of preschool, primary and secondary levels assume in public and private schools.

Guidance Counselor Competencies

The competencies of guidance or counselor teachers are to design methodological strategies that promote the integral conception of the human person. That includes the development of the personality, the complex process of the construction of knowledge, the formation of interests, motivations and expectations, decision-making, and the development of evaluation processes (National Commission of the Civil Service, 2010). In this sense, the guidance teacher is a fundamental part of the school, whose role is centered on the establishment of plans and programs articulated in the Institutional Educational Plan (IEP). The IEP guides strategies and activities aimed at developing behaviors, skills, values, and attitudes in the educational community. The IEP guides the design of explanatory models of human behavior that contribute to the complex training process. Types of competencies:

- **Disciplinary:** Set of knowledge and skills related to the area of specific performance of the teacher or teacher-principal;
- **Educational:** A set of knowledge and skills of the teacher or teacher-principal, to formulate, develop and evaluate teaching and learning processes in educational institutions; and
- **Behavioral:** Set of personal characteristics that favor the performance of the functions of teaching and educational management.

The State of School Guidance

The Transitional Orientation in the Process of Curricular Reorganization by Cycles

The concept of transition between levels of education related to career choice is not clearly established. Therefore, the tasks related to this process are not either. In transitions such as between primary and secondary education that establish radically different academic conditions, no specific or standardized guiding actions are identified. Based on the curricular reorganization, in which there are scheduled moments of academic transition, it would be expected that, for each cycle established in pre-school, primary and secondary schools, interdisciplinary school guidance teams will be appointed to facilitate such transitions (Secretary of Education, 2016). The transition from the fifth grade of elementary education to the sixth grade in secondary education deserves special attention because the concept of transitional guidance is directly anchored in career guidance. The same applies to the transition from ninth grade (where compulsory education is completed) to the 10th grade where elective middle education begins.

At the level of higher education, (such as universities) there are Departments of Student Well-being made up mainly of psychologists who do not necessarily adhere to a career services approach. These professionals are mainly concerned with increasing retention in the institution, given the high dropout rate in the first five semesters. As seen in the Integral Program for Student Permanence (PIPE) of the Area Andina University Foundation (National Ministry of Education, 2011), these actions range from institutional orientation programs, to career finance systems, to recreational and cultural programs, which are unrelated to academic programs.

In private schools, career services are even more dispersed. It is very difficult to identify activities common in private primary and secondary schools related to career services, given the administrative emphasis on supporting the process of selection, enrollment, and retention of students. In some cases, the school counselor or school psychologist is an assistant of the board with clear administrative duties. This is not unlike what happens in public schools. Depending

on the human and economic resources available to private schools, there is an increasing responsiveness to expectations from outside the primary and secondary schools, i.e. from the business sector. The same is true for institutions of higher education.

It is precisely from the institutions of higher education that many of the promotional activities originate. Proliferation of so-called ‘university fairs’ have the purpose of assembling students in grades 10 and 11 to receive a recruitment talk, which may be oriented towards university careers or technical occupations. There is also some intervention by the Chamber of Commerce in the country through its organizational division called Entrepreneurs for Education (ExE) from its Da La Talla program in partnership with its Uniempresarial University (Brunal, 2012). Some of the time at these fairs promoting university programs may include conferences led by psychologists and professional counselors, and complemented by some updated programs by counselors.

Despite this type of activity, the current situation for students leaving post-secondary education is still worrying because of the high dropout rate in the first semester, ranging from 32% in professional-technical education (presumably due to the low costs, the ease of entry to this level of education since only graduation from grade 9 is required, and its exploratory nature) to 9.3% for universities, with technological education in the middle at 18%. This dropout rate is alarming as it involves an expensive investment of human and economic resources.

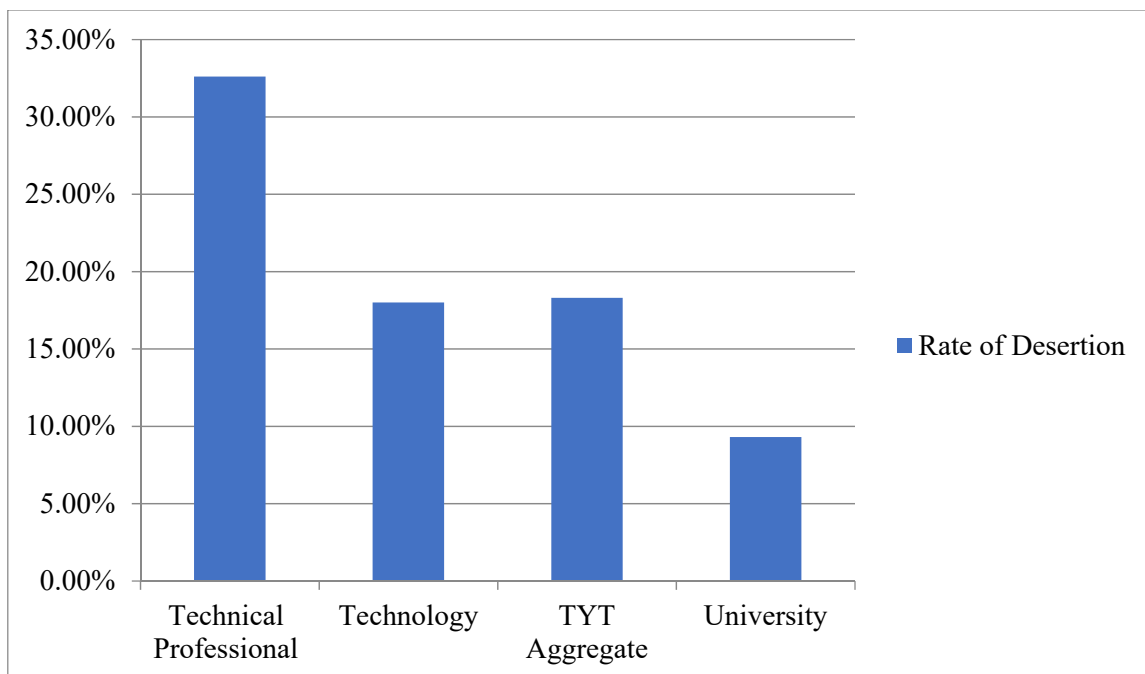


Figure 5.1. The rate of desertion per period in 2015 based on the level of education.

In some cases, dropping out is due to the emotional exhaustion (implying voluntary or compulsory desertion). Usually, there is a relatively permanent abandonment of higher education and a forced entry to the labor force. Dropouts often increase the population internationally classified as Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET), which soon will reach a majority of youth who have no professional skills. Columbia is no stranger to the NEET phenomenon (El Pais, 2016). 42.4% of young people between 14 and 28 years old were in this situation, being inactive in the period between January and March of this year, during which the unemployment rate was 18% of the population (El Pais, 2016).

This is a great opportunity for people skilled in career services working with the non-school population. However, there is no staff with this designation, either from governmental organizations or from private institutions. There are cases where the government, such as ministries and education secretariats, has established intersectoral alliances with entities in the "Economic Development" sector, mechanically replacing the concept of vocational guidance with career guidance without directly addressing the problem of youth in the NEET population.

Unemployment Services

Law 1636 of 2013 set up services for the unemployed in Colombia. Ultimately the goal was to create a mechanism that would protect the unemployed. The purpose of the mechanism will be the articulation and execution of a comprehensive system of active and passive policies to mitigate the effects of unemployment faced by workers; while facilitating the reintegration of the unemployed population into the labor market in conditions of dignity, improving of the quality of life, and finding permanent formal employment. (Law 1636 of 2013, Article 1)

It created the Public Employment Service, as part of this mechanism, and efficient and effective job search tools. Recently state and mixed dependencies have been created and/or strengthened that provide some career guidance. According to the Ministry of Labor (2013), approximately six employment centers called COLABORA were established in the country. Previously, the Public Employment Agency of the National Apprenticeship Service (SENA) had been providing similar services. According to the Public Employment Agency (n.d.), the Public Employment Agency of SENA provides a free, non-discriminating public labor intermediation service so that Colombians can participate in employment opportunities and entrepreneurs can find the talent they need to fill their vacancies. Likewise, it supports the implementation of active employment policies, contributing to the achievement of the objectives set by the National Government for the benefit of the Colombian population. Therefore, the Public Employment Agency has optimized its job intermediation tool, through which it facilitates the organized contact between job seekers

and entrepreneurs, supported by a personalized service to guide and advise users on the dynamics of the labor market through a nationwide network of offices. (para 1-3)

On the other hand, this new service is partly intended to substitute for "unemployment insurance," which was administered by the employment agency of the family compensation funds (Compensar, 2016), and was not charged with career guidance. The unemployment insurance offered basic aspects of human resources management (training, job updating, relocation assistance, database management, short training courses to improve general skills, etc.) with participation by organizational psychologists, who did not necessarily have training in career services.

Academic Training of School Counselors

The training of all professional counselors is at the university professional level and averages 10 semesters in duration. The undergraduate training for these professionals is very diverse, including psychology, social work, sociology, occupational therapy, and vocational education. These professionals obtain graduate degrees in diverse areas ranging from common training in the area of social sciences, humanities, and social research to specific therapeutic skills such as psychologists or occupational therapists, through training in educational psychology with a practicum in a school setting. Therefore, it is very difficult to establish common training for the different professionals in the field. The training of counselors in Columbia builds on their professional (undergraduate) training and is humanistic in nature, combining three major disciplinary areas:

1. **Educational Sciences:** Education and educational psychology, educational administration (in some cases);
2. **Health Sciences:** Psychology, occupational therapy, speech therapy; and
3. **Social Sciences:** Sociology and social work.

This training is required to allow interdisciplinary school guidance teams to work together within preschool, primary and secondary schools, levels for which most of the actions related to career guidance are designed and implemented. In some cases, counselors have experience as a classroom teacher and moved into counseling through a process called relocation by specialty administered by the Secretary of Education after obtaining specific academic training recognized in the field of counseling (psychology or educational psychology mainly). This diversity of backgrounds in the field determines, to a great extent, the diversity of approaches to fulfilling, the duties of school counselors. Some professionals take an approach with asocial emphasis, others with an emphasis on academic and behavioral approach to students and teachers, and others with a clinical-therapeutic approach. Others, more by work experience and their theoretical preferences, focus on career guidance.

This implies that not all professionals, working in the field of school guidance, are dedicated exclusively to career guidance. In fact, no school counselors in the country can dedicate themselves exclusively to this area, because they are immersed in a school environment that demands a multiplicity of actions not necessarily related to their official functions. In addition, by reviewing the curricula, it is possible to affirm that the only profession that includes the theme of school guidance as such is educational psychology, which delves into the area of counseling, including institutional practices in both public and private schools. This training can only be obtained at Tunja Pedagogical and Technological University (UPTC), which offers a bachelor's degree, and in the National Pedagogical University of Bogotá (UPN), which is eliminating this degree for the year 2017. At different times since 2001, postgraduate options have been offered that specialized in family guidance at Monserrate University and educational counseling and human development at the Universidad El Bosque. The specialization in vocational and occupational guidance at Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander Sede Cúcuta was also offered until 2013.

Challenges and Opportunities for Certification and Accreditation

Government Efforts to Standardize Services. National Accreditation Council (NAC)

It is pertinent to note that,

The regulation of the exercise of professions in Colombia is based on the Political Constitution of 1991, Article 26 which establishes that every person is free to choose a profession or trade. The law may require certificates of competence. The competence authorities shall inspect and monitor the exercise of the professions. Occupations, arts, and crafts that do not require academic training are free of these requirements, except those involving a social risk. Legally recognized professions can be organized into colleges. (National Ministry of Education, n.d.b, para. 4)

The Colombian government heads the National Accreditation Council, an academic body under the National Council of Higher Education that has undertaken certification, which involves a great deal of epistemological, methodological, and procedural work that have yet to be completed. The multidisciplinary conditions of the field call for a paradigm revolution to produce a basic model on which to propose common training and updated programs acceptable to the community. The National Accreditation Council, created as an academic body by Law 30 of 1992, is composed of seven academics. The National Accreditation Council reviews the

accreditation process, organizes it, supervises it, certifies its quality and finally recommends to the Minister of National Education to accredit the programs and institutions that deserve it.

In Colombia this credentialing in the field of school counseling is incipient, despite its long history. Some academic movements (national, departmental, and local networks of professional counselors) have been developing political and social action plans. They seek to build social and educational movements in several regions of the country, but without guiding bodies that unify these actions. Formation of guiding bodies is necessary to be able to propose a system of certification and accreditation, which could have great advantages in giving more credibility to professionals in the field and could enhance the understanding within the education community of the importance of guidance.

Continuing Education

Informal continuing education for professional counselors in the country is sporadic, diversified based on the programmatic interests of the different secretariats of education in the country, and is not standardized. In some cases, it is carried out by intersectoral agreements (health sector, special protection or social welfare) and is not necessarily specific to career services. Once, the Javeriana University of Bogota offered a diploma in Professional Guidance, where the objective was to foster critical reflection and exchange around the question of career choice. The same university also offered a 130-hour virtual diploma in Psychology of School Counseling. At other times, guidance in the Teacher's to Teachers program recognized peer training sponsored by the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI) and the Secretary of Education of Bogotá offered several short seminars (eight hours) on the subject under the Transitional Guidance approach, covering a population of approximately 100 people per year in the capital alone. In no case did these programs require supervised practice due to insufficient resource allocation.

On the side of private entities, the Bogota Chamber of Commerce, through its Da la Talla program, run by the Entrepreneurs for Education division, offered sporadic short training programs (30 hours on average) with an Educational Coaching approach. Recently the Secretary of Education of Bogota, in agreement with Universidad del Rosario, created a career guidance project for public school counselors to be implemented in 2017.

Non-Academic Training

There are no recognized non-academic programs, because the government only hires school counselors trained in an approved academic program. On the other hand, there are many informal programs (between eight and 100 hours) to update skills, based on the interests of each secretariat of education. These programs are extremely varied, although they are concentrated mainly in handling behavior problems, working with at-risk youth, and education about sexuality.

Evaluation of the Accreditation Process

Starting in 2009, all professionals entering the field must complete the Higher Education Quality (ECAES) status examination as a graduation requirement. In order to be hired as a teacher, they must pass the ECAES exam and hold a specific profession's card (although not all the primary teachers are required to hold such a card to start their work). For those with advance training (psychologists, sociologists, social workers, occupational therapists), a one-year course in teacher education is also required. It is also noteworthy that the same universities are involved in a joint process of peer accreditation coordinated by the Ministry of Education. Those who need a card in the profession of psychology apply through the Colombian College of Psychologists. Other professions such as adult educator, school psychologist, and social work are under review by the National Accreditation Council.

Once they enter the teaching profession, they are subject to annual assessments of professional performance, and are subject to the process of promotion (salary adjustment) of all other teachers in the public sector. The annual evaluation of the performance of current school staff is divided into two phases: The first phase refers to the probationary period at the end of the first year of work and the subsequent annual performance evaluation that applies only to educators who are governed by Decree Law 1278 of 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2012). These evaluations fully occupy the attention of counselor teachers, which means that guidance professionals are not searching for other types of credentials, especially when it is understood from the Ministry of Education that this process is sufficient. According to the Ministry of Education (2012), the evaluation for teachers becomes a criterion of accreditation. Accreditation refers to specific aspects related to important learning issues raised in the plans and programs of study, and relates to improving outcomes. It is also clear that no specific accreditation is required to establish the level of experience necessary to begin your duties, or to pass the probationary period, nor for the salary adjustment process, which is another purpose of professional practice in socio-economic terms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The counseling community in Columbia has not been able to transcend the needs of labor, represented by unions of educators such as Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE) at the national level, or the District Association of Educators (ADE) at the Bogota level, in order to clearly establish the common social purposes that give meaning to their role in the community. Although there is virtually no awareness of the standards for career counselors identified by National Career Development Association, it is also true that, given that there is no entity that leads training and certification of career counselors in this country, this situation will change.

Based on the current dynamics of the different counselor movements in the country, the conditions are favorable for a College of Guidance Professionals, a project that is currently

being disseminated in the country's social networks to professionals in the field through a survey on google drive. This College would be dedicated to the task of unifying and establishing a basic theoretical paradigm from which common standards, methodologies and actions of intervention for the various specialties in the field are defined (which, among other things, avoids the decentralized issuance of sector-type professional cards). It would play the role of peer-based academic self-regulation. However, there will need to be some specific criteria (possibly National Career Development Association -style benchmarks) related to certification to perform important social functions.

Opportunities

One of the possible opportunities for the development of the field could be presented by with the aforementioned NEET population that is between 18 and 30 years old. This issue is virtually invisible to state entities and even non-governmental organizations. The need for general and specific training to attend to this population represents an opportunity to introduce the concept of career counseling. This initiative, backed by a college of professional counselors, could provide the impetus to define this new specialty, both for the general population and for training and certification.

Future Directions

In order to develop a specialty called career counselor, the government of Columbia would need to pass legislation creating such a position. Columbia would need a College of Counselors, such as exists in Chile or Costa Rica. Then, Columbia would need to establish an accreditation and/or certification mechanism recognized by the National Ministry of Education and implemented by departmental secretariats.

The value of career counselors could be articulated in different national and international academic events (congresses, symposia, conferences, etc.). If the importance of career counseling is publicized, and the qualifications of the programs offered are clear, it would be possible to define this new field. On the other hand, a direct link between the new occupation and the salary adjustment system is required so that this specialty represents added value for the person obtaining the skills.

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