1. Introduction

This study deals with the future orientation and occupational aspirations of dropout youth who receive caregiving services from the Youth Advancement Units. Professionals who work with dropout youth claim that such adolescents are typified by poor self-image and weak self-efficacy, scanty ability to think about the future, and difficulty in generating dreams and aspirations about the future. To determine whether these allegations are justified, particularly in view of the changes in the characteristics of the Youth Advancement Units’ client population in recent years, there was a need for research in which these young people would be asked, directly, how they perceive their future and define their general aspirations and, in a more focused way, their occupational aspirations. The need for such research is especially acute at this time of continual change in the occupational world and acute uncertainty about which occupations will remain relevant in the current labor market and that to come. Education systems around the world, and in Israel, are struggling to keep up with the pace of change. Therefore, they turn out graduates who are deficient in the knowledge and skills that they need for optimum integration into the twenty-first-century labor market. This state of affairs is complicated enough for high-school students at large, but it is all the more challenging for those who drop out of the education system, given their even greater deficits in these skills.

Several studies have been done in Israel on the future aspirations of youth. Seginer, for example, took an in-depth look at the future orientation of Israeli youth in terms of hopes, expectations, and fears (Seginer, 1995, 2000) and personal development (Seginer, 2001). In a cultural context, one may consult Seginer and Halabi (1991) and Seginer (2003). Kaplan Toren (1995) investigated the future orientation of immigrant youth of Ethiopian origin and its connection with their sense of national belonging. Mahajna (2014) looked into the nexus of family and school environment as a factor of influence on the future orientation of Arab youth in Israel. Additional studies deal with career preparation or occupational aspirations by investigating, for example, the future plans of at-risk youth in residential institutions (Cinamon & Rich, 2014) and preparing minority youth for the integration of family and work life (Cinamon, 2006). To the best of my knowledge, however, this study is the first that looks into the future orientation and occupational aspirations of youth dropouts who receive care from the Youth Advancement Units in Israel. The research needed to understand this phenomenon is unique and different from studies about other youth populations such as those mentioned above. Such research would make it possible to construct a theoretical framework that may be helpful in promoting practical programs of action for the development of future orientation and aspirations among these young people. The inculcation of occupational orientation among dropout youth is important for more than their personal development and the formation of their self-identity; it also has dimensions that relate to developing resilience and mitigating risk behaviors, matters of critical importance for at-risk youth.

My connection with this research topic traces to my many years of familiarity with the research field in the context of youth. I have engaged in various aspects of youth and informal education for more than thirty years. At the beginning of my professional career, I held counseling and program-development positions with the Scouts movement and ran value-related activities in schools as well as enrichment groups. Concurrently, I finished a bachelor’s degree in Social Theater and a master’s degree in Drama Therapy. My search for a place to do my internship led me almost by chance to a Youth Advancement Unit near my home. It was there that I had my first encounter with at-risk youth whose lives presented them with no few challenges and hardships in personal, family, social, and/or scholastic terms, pursuant to which they had dropped out of school. My job at the time was to establish a meaningful relationship with them, understand their specific needs, and together to construct programs that would re-integrate them into normative life. One of my main tasks was to enable them to set goals for their future course of life. When I gave them an assignment in which they were to draw pictures of themselves in the future (they appear in the appendix [?] as one of the research tools), I realized how frustrating and confusing this seemingly simple exercise was for these young people and how much resistance and, above all, lack of knowledge it revealed in them. One of the main goals at Youth Advancement is to re-integrate these adolescents into areas of life that are relevant to them and to carve out a zone of opportunities and possibilities in which they may fulfill their personal potential. Thus, their inability to envision and plan for the future crimps their ability to fulfill their potential and to develop. I was troubled by the thought that these adolescents have no dream or aspiration that might inspire and motivate them to progress toward adult life.

The question of the future orientation of dropout youth continued to occupy me in my ensuing positions at the Youth Investment Department, both as a district facilitator for the units and also, and mainly, when I was appointed more than a decade ago to the post of National Employment Facilitator, in charge of preparing young people for the world of work. In this capacity, I placed strong emphasis on activities that would enable them to develop occupational aspirations and experience ways of fulfilling them. The comprehensive fieldwork and vast experience that I amassed made me realize how important these matters are and how urgently they need deeper theoretical and research attention.

Research Background

*In the three short decades between now and the twenty-first century, millions of ordinary, psychologically normal people will face an abrupt collision with the future. Citizens of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations, many of them will find it increasingly painful to keep up with the incessant demand for change that characterizes our time. For them, the future will have arrived too soon….*

(Toffler, 1970, p. 9)

These are the opening words of the author and futurologist Alvin Toffler in his book *Future Shock*, published in 1970. In this book, he defines the term “future shock” as a specific psychological phenomenon that affects individuals and entire societies and manifests in “too much change in a too short amount of time.” Toffler claimed that society is undergoing an enormous structural revolution, from industrial to super-industrial, and believed that the accelerated technological and social changes would leave the individual in a state of detachment from reality. Toffler was found to be a modern prophet who foresaw the crisis that would beset people who are unprepared for the predicted changes and the backwardness that would threaten societies that would fail to prepare for changes in family life, the institution of marriage, education, culture, the environment, and employment (Galili, 2000).About fifty years after the book was published, we are living the reality Toffler had pictured. Human society did not collapse in the aftermath of technological and social changes. On the contrary: technology’s far-reaching development has led to revolutionary changes in science, medicine, space, the economy, industry, media, and society as a whole. The twenty-first century, however, has certainly brought many challenges, such as preserving the planet and the environment; surmounting problems in the use of natural resources; producing energy and food supply; defeating world poverty; dealing with menacing processes of globalization; achieving stability and solving conflicts between people, nationalities, and states; coping with immigration and a multicultural society; mitigating human-rights violations; and attaining gender equality (Martin, 2007).

Around the world today, more than 1.2 billion people—16 percent of humankind—are aged 15–24. Their numbers are expected to grow in the decades to come. This is important because it is the destiny of the young to power and lead the world economy. If they are given the right knowledge, the necessary skills, and the appropriate opportunities, they may be an important motive force for positive development and stability of the world. The main challenge that states face is how to integrate the young into this economy and how to engineer the right processes in the transition of youth from school to the world of work. The occupational world that today’s young people encounter is a continually changing one typified by comprehensive globalization processes, powerful technological progress, varying structures of employment, and the emergence of new occupations and new opportunities that create diverse occupational possibilities, in which broadly educated and highly skilled workers are in high demand (United Nations, 2015). Youth employment is central among the concerns of leading figures in the economy as well as politicians, policymakers, international organizations, and even researchers. All are direly concerned the employment opportunities that are available to adolescents, particularly after the global economic crisis of 2008. The unemployment rate among youth was 13 percent in 2017; in absolute numbers, this means that 67,000,000 people aged 15–24 who reported that they were actively seeking work but could not find it. Inability to find appropriate work poses even greater difficulties for immigrant youth, those from less-developed countries, and those who drop out of formal education and lack schooling and requisite skills (United Nations, 2018). A distinction needs to be made between young people who are still seeking their path to the adult world and those defined as NEETs (***N***ot in ***Employment***, ***E***ducation, or ***T***raining). This expression, “NEET,” denotes youth and young adults who have no long-term affiliation with any formal or informal setting of study or work and are at acute risk of losing their human capital, squandering their economic resources, and tumbling into social exclusion. By systematically estimating the percent of youth and young adults defined as NEET, each country can assess the magnitude and characteristics of the phenomenon and develop policies for prevention and for the advancement of this population group (Eurofound, 2016). In 2017, 11 percent of youth were defined as NEET on average in the OECD countries, with even higher percentages encountered among girls and young women (OECD, 2019). These rates are troubling because unless its situation changes meaningfully, this population may find itself in the future, and for years, deficient in education and excluded from the labor cycle, prone to various forms of economic and psychological distress that affect individuals as well as society at large. The way to cope with such a phenomenon is to encourage these youth to reflect on their future orientation, choose an occupational aspiration, and construct a path of life that will promote their aspirations and their lives generally.

Israel’s dropout rate has been falling steeply in recent years; in 2015, 8.5 percent of seventeen-year-olds were not enrolled in any scholastic setting. Still, its share of NEETs among youth and young adults (15–19) exceeded the OECD average—8.8 percent in Israel as again 6.5 percent in the OECD countries (Kahan-Strawczynski, 2017). A country acquires the ability to solve its NEET problem by enrolling these young people in structured government-sponsored programs, as in the activity of the Youth Advancement Units.

The Youth Advancement Units belong to a public authority, the Youth Advancement Department of the Israel Ministry of Education, that deals with youth aged 14–18 who dropped out of school or are on the verge of doing so. In Israel, there are 170 such units that serve all types of populations and sectors, dealing with approximately 15,000 youth, of whom about 6,000 are dropouts. The clients of the units receive a basket of services that includes personal or group therapy and consultation, high-school equivalency, occupational skills, programs to prevent at-risk behavior, and preparation for military service and the employment world (Ministry of Education, 2019). The part of the activity pertaining to employment combines mental and emotional preparation for the world of work along with vocational training and experience. The basic principles of employment at Youth Advancement include employment as an educational-therapeutic tool for reducing risk and vagrancy; preparation for a changing, relevant occupational world; development of personal, social, and functional skills; creation of success stories through employment; inculcation of the conception of an image of future life; and career planning.

A significant part of the employment content at Youth Advancement is the adolescents’ pursuit of their aspirations and dreams of the future in general and their occupational-employment future in particular. Youth dropouts, having experienced scholastic failures that led to their disengagement from school, are characterized by low self-esteem and self-efficacy and have difficulty conceiving and envisioning their futures as well as selecting and acquiring a trade. Future orientation is a part of the development of personality and personal identity and an important component of adolescence. The inability to generate such an orientation, coupled with failure to complete formal education, positions dropout youth as a population that lacks the employment capabilities that are needed for their integration into the world of work.

Research on the future orientation of dropout youth and the identification and mapping of their occupational aspirations will yield deeper and clearer knowledge of the subject. By identifying their perceptions of their future, understanding the sociological and psychological variables that influence their future orientation and occupational aspirations, and conceptualizing and creating a theoretical model, the Youth Advancement Department will be in a position to establish policy and formulate plans that will inspire the occupational aspirations of the youth in its care and enable them to integrate better and more correctly into the world of work.

Research objectives

Main objective

To develop a conceptual model and theoretical framework for understanding the occupational aspirations of dropout youth.

Secondary objectives

1. To identify dropout youths’ individual perceptions of their future.

2. To map the occupational aspirations of dropout youth handled by the Youth Advancement Units.

3. To identify the sociological-psychological factors that are involved in the future orientation and occupational aspirations of dropout youth.

Research questions

1. How do dropout youth perceive their future?

2. What are the occupational aspirations of dropout youth?

3. What sociological-psychological factors are involved in the future orientation and occupational aspirations of dropout youth?

Research methodology

The methodology chosen is qualitative research based on grounded theory. To carry out the study, three stages involving three research tools were chosen. First, the participating youth were given semi-structured interviews. Among the various population groups treated by the Youth Advancement Units, the population chosen was composed of “secular” (not religious, not ultra-Orthodox, not immigrant, and not Arab) youngsters aged 15–18. The interview method was invoked on the basis of grounded theory, in which a small number of participants was chosen as a theoretical sample, the interviews were given, and afterwards the findings were analyzed. Subsequently, the questions were rephrased for use in an additional round of interviews, and the process was repeated over the course of year, until saturation was achieved.

In Stage 2, a focus group was held with eight educational-therapeutic supervisors who steward the units’ educational and therapeutic work on a daily basis. The focus group met after the young people were interviewed and were shown most of the interview findings.

Stage 3 involved the analysis of the learning outcomes of the Youth Advancement Units’ programs that prepare young people for the world of work. This analysis made it possible to segment both the occupational aspirations of the dropout youth and their future orientation. Some sixty outcomes were analyzed.

On the basis of the three research tools, the overall process of analyzing the findings was grounded, the Discussion was written, and the Conclusions were enunciated.

This thesis is composed of five sections:

1. A Literature Review that presents the theoretical fundamentals of the research work, e.g., the development of the world of work, particularly that of the twenty-first century; the place of adolescents in this world, the phenomenon of youth and young adults who are NEET (***N***ot in ***Employment***, ***E***ducation, or ***T***raining), the time perspective, future orientation, and occupational aspirations of the research population; and the consolidation of a theory in regard to adolescence, adolescents, and dropout adolescents:. The Literature Review culminates with a theory associated with dropout youth, educational-therapeutic work, and background information about the Youth Advancement Units that serve these young people.
2. A Methodology section that presents the research method chosen—qualitative research based on grounded theory. It introduces the research population and describes the research program in its three stages, each comprising a different research tool: interviews, focus group, and document analysis.
3. A Findings section that presents the set of categories that emerged from the coding of the interviews and the emergence of the various themes, with examples of participants’ remarks by means of authentic direct quotations that underlie the findings that emerged from each category.
4. A Discussion section, divided into three parts that propose to answer the three research questions. In the Discussion, the findings that emerged from the previous section are interpreted, their concordance or clash with the existing literature on the topic is assessed, and the implications of each part of the discussion are determined.
5. A Conclusions section that presents factual inferences from the Discussion, presents a new theoretical model for understanding the future orientation and occupational aspirations of dropout youth, and offers applied and practical conclusions as the outcomes of the research. Here, too, are shown the limitations of the study in the context of its tools, its author, and its participants, and, finally, recommendations for relevant further study.

Keywords: dropout youth, future orientation, occupational aspiration, twenty-first-century world of work, career preparation, NEET