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Building Future Career Development Programs for Adolescents

Kerry Bernes, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Associate Professor of Educational and Counselling Psychology
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Kris Magnusson, Ph.D.

Professor of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Associate Dean
University of Lethbridge
Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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Introduction

Heuristically, adolescent career development programs may provide significant outcomes on personal, social, economic and national development levels. Unfortunately, however, very little research has been done on what is and what is not working within existing adolescent career development programs. Instead, adults continue to develop multiple resources that lack integration for adolescents, most notably, without the input from the students themselves (Hiebert et al., 2001). Unfortunately, the field appears to suffer from a lack of integration, wherein efficacy data on current programs is generally scarce and significant longitudinal data is absent. Creating a sense of integration, evaluating the results of current career development programs and creating longitudinal studies to gather objective data on the long-term impact of these programs appear to be critical missing ingredients. Without this research, we will never uncover the critical ingredients that are needed to support significant personal, social, economic and national development. Worse yet, the field may continue to go on to develop one product after another until it fragments so significantly that it fails to attract any further resources for development. In other words, the writers believe that too many resources are going into new products without any efficacy data to support them, currently or on a longitudinal basis, and that without some integration and objective support for their use, the field may fail to be financially supported in a future wherein financial resources are allocated upon the basis of results, not heuristic value.

To counter this threat, the writers have been engaged in a research project entitled, the “Comprehensive Career Needs Survey” in Southern Alberta. This study examined the career development needs of adolescents in grades 7-12 from the perspectives of the students, their parents, teachers, administrators, and counsellors. Over 9500 respondents participated in this study. Having become engaged in this data, the writers became curious what professionals in the field thought about the topic of building future career development programs for adolescents. Specifically, the writers wanted to know where career practitioners thought the field should be going, what would be ideal and what needed to be done in order to begin to move the field in appropriate directions. Consequently, this paper provides a point form listing of some of the initial themes from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey, lists some recommendations for

the future from this study and then summarizes the comments from the career practitioners who attended this session at the National Consultation on Career Development in Ottawa, Canada in January 2004.

Initial Themes from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey

In order to provide a context for a discussion about future career development programs for adolescents, some summary findings from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey are outlined in point form below. Interested readers are referred to Bloxom and Bernes (2003); Magnusson and Bernes (2002); and Pyne et al. (2002) for a more comprehensive account of the results of this study.

1. Overall, adults do not see students as being prepared for their next career step.
2. Students generally state that they have plans, are quite confident in their future, and report the value of career planning.
3. Students express little awareness of or satisfaction in existing career services or resources.
4. Students turn to their parents as the primary source of career planning help.
5. Getting support for career plans is a major concern for students.
6. Students prefer family and friends to school personnel when it comes to seeking support for career planning, but seventy percent of students in grades 7-12 report the need for additional support.
7. There appears to be a need to involve parents more extensively in career planning, however, the students also clearly requested specific information, and specific help with the process of career planning, which are more likely to be provided by trained counsellors.

Initial Recommendations from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey

Several initial recommendations for the future have evolved from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey. These recommendations are summarized below:

1. Provide proactive career counselling. Rather than almost exclusively engaging in reactive and crisis management services, school counsellors should be involved in developing and participating in formalized career curricula.
2. The field should put less of an emphasis on new resources and put more of an emphasis on creating a process-based, integrated and developmental career curriculum for grades 7 – 12.

3. Evaluate the efficacy of career development programs to ensure they are meeting the current and longitudinal needs of adolescents.
4. Use the results of efficacy studies to make program modifications, thus continuing to improve the quality of existing programs.
5. Provide specific training to teachers and counsellors in the implementation of comprehensive and integrated career development curriculum.
6. Provide training to parents to enhance the natural alliance between parents and adolescents.
7. Balance familial and external support in order to ensure adolescents get the positive aspects of parental involvement, but also get the concrete career information they need from trained counsellors.
8. Create relationships/partnerships in the community (guest speakers, job shadow, work experience, etc.) in order to enhance support, experiential knowledge and information.

Recommendations from Career Practitioners

Career practitioners were asked what they thought would be ideal for future career development programs for adolescents. Practitioners stated the need for:

1. Adolescent career development programs to be made important within national public policy. Specifically, they stated that a national policy on career development might serve to cut down on provincial duplication of resources and make it easier to begin the process of collecting outcome data on a longitudinal basis.
2. The development of a Kindergarten through Grade 12 career development curriculum that is infused and integrated across all the other academic subjects. For example, they stated that resumes could be taught in English classes and labor market information could be taught in Social Studies classes.
3. Career consultants to consult with teachers to enhance the integration of career development curriculum across the academic subjects.
4. Pre-service teachers to receive training in career development practices to ensure infusion across all academic subjects.

5. The development of robust community based partnerships wherein schools, government departments, community agencies and businesses could integrate resources to coordinate and enhance opportunities for adolescents. Here practitioners emphasized that it would be important for each partner to share resources rather than build their own empires in relative isolation from one another. It was stated that working with partners would prevent organizations from duplicating services and encourage them to spend money on areas needing further development.

Career Practitioners were also asked what needs to be done on a more immediate basis, as the field begins to work toward the above noted ideals. Practitioners stated the need to:

1. Find more creative strategies for engaging parents in learning to help their children with career planning.
2. Teach students to be more proactive in self-assessment and self-marketing.
3. Provide students with more career information.
4. Get students thinking about careers earlier and to infuse this orientation throughout field trips, discussions, show and tell etc.
5. Get parents and students to perceive that students are ready to begin exploring the field of careers at all ages and that the earlier the exploration and process of career planning begins the better.
6. Separate personal counselling from career counselling. Here practitioners suggested that personal counselling took too much of the counsellor's time in schools, time that could be going into proactive career counselling. Specifically, practitioners recommended that personal counselling issues should be referred out of schools or that counselling roles within schools be divided between personal counselling and career counselling with separate counsellors for each role.

Summary

As is suggested above, the field of adolescent career development is in need of some refinements. Specifically, the proliferation of one new product after another may be putting the field at risk of not attending to the more complex but necessary tasks. The research from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey and comments from career practitioners in the field all seem to suggest that it is time for resources

to become integrated, for efficacy studies to be conducted and for the results of these studies to be used for program modifications. More importantly, it is time for the field to begin to tackle questions of a longitudinal nature. Specifically, the impact of these programs on personal, social, economic and national development needs to be studied. By effectively measuring the current and longitudinal impact of these programs, the field of career development may move beyond heuristic value and begin to objectively demonstrate its true potential for personal, social, economic and national development.

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