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THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS IN RELATION TO STUDENT DECISION MAKING REGARDING JOBS AND CAREERS

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Introduction

Secondary schools in most parts of Australia now conduct work experience programmes which provide for student participation in normal conditions of work. Generally, work experience is now embedded within what is termed a 'Transition Education' programme, and usually includes elements of social studies, skills associated with job acquisition, and components designed to prepare the student for transition from school to work.

In the past decade, there has been a rapid increase in the number of such programmes. In Tasmania, this involvement has grown from a work experience scheme for 60 students in two high schools, funded by the Special Projects Committee of the Australian Schools Commission in 1974, to a situation where about 90% of secondary schools offered some sort of programme in 1982 (Education Department of Tasmania, 1981:1). Such a response has been caused by a number of motivations, partly educational and partly political, but particularly related to a growing concern for youth unemployment.

Recommendations regarding transition education have appeared in major reports such as the Karmel Report (1973) and the Poverty and Education in Australia Report (1976). In Tasmania, the State Department of Education (1980a, 1980b, 1980c, n.d.) has produced a number of publications to be used as support documents for an educational enterprise that has had an almost embarrassing growth rate.

As might be imagined, in the absence of evaluative evidence there is considerable anxiety about the educational outcome of transition education. In particular, teachers in the schools apparently have

been faced with a whole new set of demands placed upon them by the expansion of transition education programmes. In light of the variety of claims being made about such programmes it is reasonable to ask whether teachers have been able to respond effectively to these increased demands. Have such new adjustments to the curriculum altered the patterns of influence which teachers may exert? What roles in fact do teachers now play, especially in relation to decisions being required of students who are about to enter the uncertain world of work? Have teachers become more significant to school leavers who are now more than ever being asked to connect the world of school with the world of work?

This paper focuses upon the role of the teacher in relation to the information gathering and decision making processes used by students when dealing with the question of jobs and careers — and the nature of the teacher's influence in the processes. In this respect, the study explores and attempts to answer some of the above questions. The data are abstracted from a survey case study of an independent, co-educational school in Tasmania, referred to as Apple College. This in its turn is one of four independent studies conducted in 1982 as part of a national evaluative enquiry into transition education programmes with specific reference to Work Experience.

Apple College, situated in an urban area of Hobart, Tasmania's capital, caters for students from preparatory to Grade 12 (2nd year of Matriculation). The total school population in 1982 (K to grade 12) was 1005, with 120 students attending Grade 10, the year in which work experience programmes were run.

Students come to the College from various parts of Hobart and also from outer suburban and country areas. The sample of students selected for this study was residentially distributed across the areas from which the total College population is derived. The school's transition education programme includes a week of work experience, which is now a well-established part of the school curriculum at Grade 10. However, transition education has been conceived at Apple College as appropriate to the whole school curriculum and not as a particular item within it. Work-related activities already occur in other grades and arrangements are in hand to introduce work experience prior to Grade 10.

Within this broad concept there are three components which occupy a focus on school and work for Grade 10 students. Firstly, the 'social science' aspects of work are treated within the social science syllabus as a series of study units. These units encourage the students to explore relationships between their 'interests', including leisure interests; their abilities, particularly in respect of school subjects; and the career choices that may be open to them. Secondly, the 'career planning' course provides a practical guide for appropriate transition from school to work. Thirdly, there is the work experience week itself. This also has involved careful definition from the students' point of view, has included discussion of all concerned parties, parents, teachers and employers, and at every step has taken account of student preferences and aptitudes.

Method

Information regarding the perceived role and influences of the teachers was gathered basically from questionnaires given to both students and teachers. The student sample consisted of approximately half the number of Grade 10 students at Apple College (N = 60; 41 males, 19 females). The other half has already completed the programme.

The student questionnaire used was one developed by ACER entitled 'School and Work', consequently no pretest was considered necessary. The questionnaire was administered immediately prior to the work experience part of the transition programme, and a modified version of the same questionnaire was administered immediately after the work experience. The modified questionnaire contained many of the same questions and also included a short section intended to elicit the students' response to the overall transition programme. It was decided to use this procedure and timing when we discovered that by far the majority of students had no experience of any sort of temporary work, and it became clear that the work experience component, though short, was likely to have considerable impact on the student, very much in the same way that a first teaching 'practice' is viewed by postgraduate students.

Information from students was collected concerning background variables such as sex, school performance, parental occupation, parental education and students' perception of their academic ability. The questionnaire contained items designed to explore

important notions associated with school and work. Three such notions had to do with:

- decision making regarding jobs and careers
- extent of planning and factors affecting decision making
- sources of information regarding work

Responses to these items allowed for a comparison of the relative influence and significance of various factors, especially teachers, upon such decision making, and variables affecting this influence.

Also, individual student interviews were conducted at the same time as the questionnaires were being administered. Of particular interest to this paper are the responses of the post-work experience interview, for example with regard to questions about students' relations with teachers as a consequence of dealing with adults in a work setting.

Only one comparable Tasmanian school was available which did not offer a work experience programme and this was used as a control group for questionnaire items. The sample consisted of 40 students, 20 boys and 20 girls. The background variable selected suggest that the control is quite similar in respect to socio-economic status of parents. In fact, in terms of socio-economic status, there is no significant difference in the responses of students in association with the key variables identifying the teachers' role.

In relation to the key question of the teacher's role and influence, student background variables of sex difference, academic performance and 'social class' were also taken into account. It was felt that differential perceptions might be held by students in respect to these variables. With regard to academic performance, students were separated into three groups based on their academic levels in English, science and mathematics. These groups are referred to subsequently as 'high', 'average', and 'low' performers. Samples are small (high = 25; average = 26; low = 9) but there are clear indications of the students' own awareness of their performance levels.

In terms of 'social class' the students were classified into three occupational groups — professional and upper professional; white collar and managerial; and labourer, skilled, and semi-skilled. These groups are referred to subsequently as 'professional', 'white collar', and 'labourer' (Professional, N = 21; white collar, N = 32, Labourer, N = 13).

Results and Discussion from Questionnaires and Interviews

In identifying specific sources of useful information regarding jobs and careers, including 'career teachers' and 'people in the occupation', there were differences between Apple College and the control group for the majority of items (see Table 1). Students at Apple College identified 'career teachers' as the major sources of useful information, whereas for the control group the major sources were 'books, handbooks, and pamphlets'.

The responses of the Apple College students are also considerably more positive for a number of other items including 'family' and 'other adults outside school'. It seems reasonable to assume that the transition education programme not only acts as an information source in its own right but also stimulates the students to enquire from other sources as well. There is also a marked post-work experience response to ''people in the occupation' by Apple College students, which suggests that the work experience is used very purposefully for information gathering.

Given the significance of work experience as a stimulus towards information gathering, as well as a source of information, the perceived role and influence of the teacher in this activity is interesting. Though students at Apple College identify 'career teachers' as a major source of useful information , 'other teachers' are not identified as significant in this regard, either by students of Apple College or the control group.

The bias of Apple College responses towards 'career teachers' is understandable in the work experience context. Yet the wider picture shows not only that 'other teachers' are regarded as less significant than 'career teachers', as sources of information for jobs, but also are less significant than members of students' families, friends, or other adults outside of school 54% claimed to have gained 'a lot' of 'useful information' from career teachers or school counsellors, compared with 8% from 'other teachers', 29% from fathers, mothers, etc., and 22% from other adults. This general result applies for both Apple College and the control group,

TABLE 1

SCHOOL AND WORK QUESTIONNAIRE

Students' responses to *'How much useful information on jobs and careers have you obtained from each of the following sources?'*

Fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, etc.

A lot	Some	A little	None		
29	49	21	0	Apple* College	Pre-test
27	52	18	0	(All)	Post-test
23	53	16	9	Control Group	

Brothers, sisters, cousins, friends

10	41	30	17	Apple* College	Pre-test
9	42	31	16	(All)	Post-test
6	21	42	32	Control Group	

Careers teachers, school counsellors

54	26	17	1	Apple* College	Pre-test
53	27	17	0	(All)	Post-test
20	33	28	20	Control Group	

Other teachers

8	38	22	29	Apple* College	Pre-test
8	37	22	31	(All)	Post-test
3	31	39	28	Control Group	

Other adults, outside of school

22	24	33	19	Apple* College	Pre-test
22	25	25	21	(All)	Post-test
12	41	36	12	Control Group	

Books, handbooks and pamphlets

40	29	22	6	Apple* College	Pre-test
44	25	23	8	(All)	Post-test
42	42	9	9	Control Group	

Audio or visual aids, like cassette tapes, films or computers

7	21	41	30	Apple* College	Pre-test
6	19	38	32	(All)	Post-test
6	14	34	37	Control Group	

People in the occupation, or at the university or college I am considering

15	15	17	50	Apple* College	Pre-test
18	16	17	47	(All)	Post-test
17	23	31	31	Control Group	

* Note: the Apple College data are presented as a weighted average:

$$\frac{\text{boys' response (AV)} + \text{girls' response (AV)}}{2}$$

to compensate for the imbalance in the boy/girl ratio (41:19).

In terms of planning and decision making in relation to jobs and careers, similar trends appear. It should be noted that preferences relating to decision making about jobs and career advice were not generally changed as a consequence of work experience (see Table 2) in which pre- and post-test figures are given). Nevertheless, students' responses to the question, 'Indicate with whom you would prefer to discuss each of the following topics' (School work, choosing school subjects, job plans when you finish your education, attending university of college, leaving high school before finishing, personal problems) indicated, for all six topics under this question, that generally they preferred parents and family above all other groups. Teachers feature strongly when it come to school work (31% response), and career teachers when it come to job plans (48%), though in both cases parents and family feature just as strongly (29% and 41% respectively). This result holds true for both Apple College and control group students. Yet in terms of choosing school subjects parents and family (53%) are overwhelmingly preferred to teachers (15%) or counsellors (15%). (Note that these responses related to students' indications of their *preferences* for persons with whom to discuss these topics. When Apple College students were asked to indicate 'with whom you have *already* discussed the . . . topics', parents and family feature considerably more strongly (see Table 3 for contrasting percentages of response)).

Decision making regarding tertiary study, or leaving before Grade 12, would seem to be for discussion mainly with parents as far as students are concerned. When it come to personal problems, clearly teachers do not figure at all. Students prefer to discuss personal problems with parents, family and friends, not teachers. Overall, 'parents and family', not teachers, are the preferred negotiators or advisors to students at Apple College and the Control school, for all six categories of information.

TABLE 2

SCHOOL AND WORK QUESTIONNAIRE

Students' responses to *'Indicate with whom you would prefer to discuss the following topics.'*

Schoolwork

Parents, Family	Career Teacher, Counsellor	Other Teachers	Friends	No-one		
29	14	31	22	1	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
30	14	27	25	1		Post-test
36	6	23	21	3	Control Group	

Choosing school subjects

Parents, Family	Career Teacher, Counsellor	Other Teachers	Friends	No-one		
53	15	15	5	3	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
54	22	12	7	3		Post-test
62	12	16	4	6	Control Group	

Job plans when you finish your education

Parents, Family	Career Teacher, Counsellor	Other Teachers	Friends	No-one		
41	48	1	7	1	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
41	46	0	9	1		Post-test
56	34	0	3	6	Control Group	

Attending university or college

Parents, Family	Career Teacher, Counsellor	Other Teachers	Friends	No-one		
62	7	10	3	16	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
60	9	9	4	14		Post-test
49	29	18	0	0	Control Group	

Leaving high school before finished

71	10	3	3	10	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
67	12	4	6	9		Post-test
56	18	3	3	15	Control Group	

Personal problems

64	0	1	25	8	Apple College (All)	Pre-test
61	0	1	25	8		Post-test
67	0	0	28	6	Control Group	

TABLE 3

SCHOOL AND WORK QUESTIONNAIRE

Students' responses to *'Indicate with whom you have already discussed the following topics. You may circle* more than one number for each topic).*

	Parents, Family	Career Teacher, Counsellor	Other Teachers	Friends	No-one	*(Total Response)
Schoolwork	44	7	27	22	0	100%(41)
Choosing school subjects	50	12	8	21	8	100%(48)
Job plans when you finish your education	43	29	6	19	2	100%(106)
Attending university or college	37	11	5	18	29	100%(76)
Leaving high school before finishing	57	3	4	10	25	100%(90)
Personal problems	59	3	3	35	24	100%(29)

Transcripts of the post-work experience interview indicate a marked increase in awareness of job and career implications, judged by the extent and scope of student comments. The transcripts of student interview responses also show that whilst students saw work experience as generally relevant to academic study, this does not imply improved relations with teachers. Only 3% of students commented on this latter aspect. Student response in both extent and quality indicated increased motivation towards school and study goals, but this does not seem to involve a change in the perception of the teachers' role in this respect.

Association with Sex Difference

Allowing for the small size of the sample, there was no significant difference between girls and boys in terms of background variables or academic performance.

In terms of the individual topics there are variations according to sex difference. In respect of leaving school and going on to tertiary study, boys are less likely to discuss these topics with teachers than are girls. For both of such topics girls are far more likely to discuss matters with friends than is the case for boys.

In terms of 'school work' girls are more likely to discuss this topic with friends than with teachers.

With regard to personal problems both boys and girls overwhelmingly prefer parents and family, and not teachers, for negotiation or advice.

Association with Academic Performance

The three groups of students, separated on the basis of levels of academic performance, also showed differences in their respective responses to the above same items. (high performers = group 1; average performers = group 2; low performers = group 3).

'Low' performers are much less likely to discuss 'school work' with friends than are the 'average' or 'high' groups. For 'low' performers, teachers (other than 'career' teachers or 'counsellors') are preferred far more than any group, including parents and family. Average performers much prefer parents and family, teachers and friends being equally less preferred by this group.

With regard to 'choosing school subjects', all three performance groups of students much prefer parents and family to teachers for such discussion. However with regard to 'job plans when you finish your education', whilst the 'high' performers prefer parents and family, the 'average' and 'low' performers prefer to discuss such plans with 'career'

teachers. 'Low' performers overwhelmingly make this preference, at the expense of discussion with parents and family.

For discussion of future attendance at university or college all three groups would much prefer parents and family, the teachers and also friends being perceived as virtually unimportant to such discussion.

Association with Social Class

This variable was defined in terms of father's occupation, or mother's occupation where the latter was the wage earner. The sample was classified into three groups: labourer, skilled and semi-skilled (group 3); white collar worker and managerial (group 2); professional and upper professional (group 1).

Bearing in mind the small sample size, certain trends were observable.

In relation to discussing 'schoolwork' both the 'professional' and 'white collar' groups prefer friends above all other groups, including parents. Both friends and parents are preferred to teachers. On the other hand, in decision-making regarding 'choosing school subjects' all three social class groups of students prefer discussion with parents and family, teachers being much less significant to both topics. However the 'professional' and 'labourer' groups do give some preference to career teachers and counsellors, as distinct from the white collar or 'middle' class group.

In making decisions about 'job plans when you finish your education', both the 'white collar' and 'labourer' groups give preference to parents and family, though in this case teachers are not far behind. However the 'professional' group clearly prefer discussion with career teachers in this matter.

With regard to decisions about 'leaving high school before finished' and 'attending university or college', there is a very strong preference for discussion with parents and family over all other groups, the teachers appearing to have a very minor role. In regard to leaving school the 'professional' group are more likely to refrain from discussing the matter at all than to seek advice from teachers.

Conclusions

In the development of such programmes which are attempting to deal with the increasingly uncertain transition from school to work, it might be imagined that teachers would play an expanding role. The results of this study indicate that this is not the case. On the contrary, in regard

to certain vital features for students of attempts to relate school and work — such as their planning and decision making in regard to jobs and careers, as well as matters of their own self confidence and self-esteem — it appears that the teachers do not play an important part as far as students are concerned. The preferred negotiators and advisors in these matters are parents and family, or perhaps friends, but not teachers.

Also, in terms of the demands placed upon the school curriculum to adjust to new circumstances, it might be expected that teachers would become key figures of influence in their decisions regarding such matters as leaving school, future jobs or future studies. Yet, again, according to this study this is not the case. Other people, especially parents and family, are given preference, though career teachers have some relevance in regard to job plans, and other teachers in relation to school work. Nevertheless, though students' motivation towards academic work in school is enhanced by the work experience part of the 'adjusting'curriculum, there appears to be no change in the minor role teachers have in this area, as perceived by students.

Finally, this study indicates that teachers are not perceived as having a significant influence in personal terms, as far as students are concerned; that is, teachers do not appear to occupy a significant pastoral role. In fact, the results show very clearly that students do not regard teachers as those to whom they would turn to, to discuss personal problems. In the decision making and planning required of students in relation to future jobs and careers, and in their attempts to solve problems associated with such demands at school, the teacher appears to possess a limited significance.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn is that to focus attention simply on the current inadequacy of teachers in this context is inappropriate. Rather should it be clear that the relationships between the factors in this new enterprise of school-and-work are more complex than they have initially appeared. The situation between students and teachers is a multi-faceted one, wherein a vast difference exists between the traditional passing on of advice and information by teacher to student, and the complicated interactions of education today in which parents, for instance, play a much more significant part.

Notwithstanding this conclusion, it would appear that further investigation of the teacher's role and influence — with a view to establishing what is legitimate and possible — is warranted.

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