Honoring Diversity in Career Guidance Practice

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Abstract

Career guidance programs in schools have always championed honoring diversity by promoting fair educational opportunities for students and helping them to realize their individual abilities and talents. To support such claims, this paper examines the extent to which the career guidance program in Malaysian schools is ready to respond to the challenge of providing services to diverse clients.

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1. Introduction

Students are diverse in their needs and interests. Career guidance program in school has always championed honouring diversity by promoting fair educational opportunities for students and helping them to realise their individual abilities and talents. Career guidance programs were designed to maximize the use people make of their talents, regardless of their background. Both career development programs and intervention programs are geared to help students to attain their individual goals and help meet public policy goals of social equity. Career guidance programs have tremendous potentials to address diversity interests in school. This paper attempts to examine and highlight the extent to which career guidance is meeting the challenge of diversified clients in the Malaysian context.

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2. Career Guidance.

A brief statement of what career guidance is may help in understanding its roles in influencing students’ career development. As a program, school career guidance refers to services planned to help students to make educational, training and occupational choices and to plan their future careers. Career guidance helps students to think about their future, explore their interests, reflect on their qualifications and understand their abilities. In a career guidance service, information is the key word. Students are taught to locate the sources of information, to select information and to use it in decision making. A survey reports that differential psychology and developmental psychology have had an important influence (Super, 1980; Holland, 1989) and one-to-one interviews and psychological testing were seen as its central tools for many years. However, in its contemporary forms, career guidance draws upon a number of disciplines: psychology; education; sociology; and labor economics (Subhi Tawil, 2001).

The principles underlying career guidance programs are to get people doing things that they enjoy doing, in which they have the interests and skills needed for doing them well and from which they get satisfaction from accomplishing them. The common terms for these criteria are “matching” or “congruence”. Congruence represents the interaction between personality characteristics and the environment and occurs when the optimum match occurs between a person’s potential, their interests, ability and aptitude for doing jobs. People are diverse in their potential and abilities. Talents and abilities can be categorized into six major groups, and 36 subgroups and some of the characteristics of an individual’s major group will overlap with some other characteristics from one or more major categories. So are the work environments (Holland, 1989). Just as people’s interests and abilities are diverse, work environments are also diverse in the same patterns, i.e the environment also comprised of six major categories and 36 subgroups.

![Figure 1. Variation of abilities and talents within individual major category of R, I, A, S, E, C](image-url)
Figure 1 displays variation of talents and abilities within each major category of Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social, (S) Enterprising and (E), Conventional (C) (Holland, 1989). There is a tendency for people to find work environments that match their talents and abilities. The learning environment in school, for example, is an academic environment (falls within I category) which requires a high level of abstract thinking. Such an environment provides opportunities only for those inclined to an academic orientation to demonstrate their abilities and skills. The environment therefore facilitates those who have matching interests in making a smooth adjustment and enhancing their abilities. Tasks such as school assignments, homework, tests and examinations are perceived by these people as challenges that need to be addressed and solved to attain satisfaction (Crites, 1981). The experience of success in completing an assignment, for example, will become an intrinsic motivation besides extrinsic motivations such as scores and grades which will further motivate them to do well in their studies. In other words, those with academic interests and abilities will have a chance to realize their potential which results in them experiencing success.

On the other hand if a person’s interests and the environment are incongruent, he or she will probably have less opportunity to demonstrate his or her talents and abilities. A person who is good with their hands doing art work which also allows free expression, for example, will get frustrated working in a science laboratory or trying to figure out a solution to a scientific problem which requires systematic thinking and rigid procedures. In such situations a person will find the demands to complete the job problematic which will hinder their progress and induce conflicts in them as the job requires different kinds of skills from those they have. As a result they could not complete the job and will become inefficient and unproductive which eventually leads to failure. Evidence shows that there is a significant relationship between failure in academic life and problematic behavior such as absenteeism, not completing school assignments and not paying attention in the classroom and some of the students in this category even resort to disruptive behavior. These behaviors are expected when a person perceives themselves as a failure. Thus, the need for students to understand their talents and it is of critical importance for them to be placed in an area of study that matches their interests.

3. Career Guidance and its potential

The importance of career intervention programs seems to increase as choices within education systems grow and as the educational choices and labor market consequences that people face become more complex. Recent experience in some other countries, such as Denmark and Finland, shows that awareness of the importance of career guidance tends to increase as countries make the pathways through education – in particular, through post-compulsory education – more flexible and more individualized. A recent development in learning system which is consumer-driven require attention to the information and advisory systems needed to make decisions efficient. This increases the importance of career guidance in helping to manage the transitions between education and working life and the transitions from one level of education to another.

A number of studies have been carried out to determine the extent to which guidance interventions result in behavioral outcomes, such as participation in education and training programs. Studies in the United Kingdom have demonstrated significant positive effects both for employed (Killeen and White, 2000) and for unemployed adults (Killeen, 1996a). An Australian study showed that even a modest career counseling intervention with a very disadvantaged group of unemployed individuals led to a significant increase in participation in learning. A Finnish study found that intensive guidance courses were more effective than subsidized employment or training in getting unemployed people off the unemployment register and into unsubsidized employment (Vuori and Vesalainen, 1999).

Career intervention programs have also been shown to have a positive impact on achievement and study skills, motivation, school completion, career awareness and career skills among low achievers. They also enhance learning motivation; reduce drop-out rates; increase career maturity and career certainty and increase students’ participation in the learning process. These effects are discussed below:
i. To enhance learning motivation (Amla et al., 2009; Sidek Noh, 2008; Aborelius & Bremberg, 1988; Lapan, Gysbers and Sun, 1997; Dekutoski, 1984). Support that was given in the form of counseling activities and other forms of career activities besides learning modules in the classroom, was able to help students, including low achievers and at-risk students, to improve their learning motivation (Sidek Noah, 2002; Amla et al., 2008; Amla & Zuria, 2002).

ii. To reduce the drop-out rate (Wonaccott, 2000; Snipe, Jason, Kempe & James, 2000; Helwig 1984; Baker 1996; Walker-Staggs, 2000). Career knowledge and skills not only reduced the drop-out rate they also at the same time improved school attendance among low achievers. Some of them even managed to continue to university level.

iii. To increase career maturity and career certainty. A curriculum specially designed to facilitate self-exploration was found to increase students’ knowledge about careers. The subjects were also able to make more realistic career decisions compared to their unrealistic decisions before attending the intervention program (Mohd Fadzil et al, 2008; Amla Salleh & Zuria Mahmud, 2002). The program also helped them to identify their talents and interests, acquire new information on the world of work, which eventually helped them to make better career choices. The experience of planning their career path might have demonstrated the relationship between career choice and academic achievement. Therefore they saw the importance of improving their academic achievements (Smith, 1994).

iv. To increase students’ participation in the learning process. Career intervention programs have always been developed based on effective learning principles, such as the objectives being understood by the learners, which make the learning experience meaningful, student-centered and activity-oriented which encourages interaction among learners and between learners and facilitators. Such design encouraged students to participate actively in exploring their interests, acquiring career information and finally planning their own career path (Mohd. Fadzil et al, 2008; Mohd. Suhaimi, 2003). Such learning environments were suitable particularly for students with low academic achievements as well as at-risk students, as they are inclined to use an active learning style.

In Malaysia there were few career modules which have been tested and they were shown to have positive impacts on students’ career awareness (Paridah Romly, 2001; Oii Kok Ha, 1994). Students also admitted that career activities such as a career fair, exposure to career information, career talks and career visits influenced their decision-making process (Sani Ismail et al., 2010; Hushim, 1994). A well-designed career guidance service has been shown to have great potential for maximizing students’ potential regardless of their background. The empirical literature suggests that evidence for the positive impact of career guidance upon short-term learning outcomes, for example self-awareness, knowledge of opportunities and decision-making skills, can be treated with considerable confidence. Evidence of the impact of career guidance upon medium-term behavioral outcomes, such as educational achievement, is generally positive.

4. Addressing Diverse Learners in Malaysia

4.1. A glimpse of Malaysian educational System

Education in Malaysia has expanded and developed to meet the new challenges of the 21st Century. As education is a public enterprise, the expenditure is funded wholly and solely by the Federal Government. The budget for education has always been the highest allocation in the yearly national budget and the fund for higher education has been comparable (4.4%) to other countries (United States of America, 4.5%; Canada, 4.6%; Denmark, 4.9% and UK, 2.0%) (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2006). The policy of 11 years of mandatory schooling for every child was introduced to ensure every citizen will receive at least 11 years (six years in primary school and five years in secondary) of basic education. To address issues of unequal opportunities due to reasons such as poverty and the geographical locations of schools and homes, physical or other forms of handicap support were introduced by the Federal Government, from monetary support in the form of scholarships to boarding schools, free text books and free nutritious food for poor children. Special allowances were given to the carers of handicapped children,
besides an educational program tailored to educable mentally retarded children and the introduction of inclusive education within normal schools for students with special needs. The move to introduce technical and vocational subjects in secondary schools recently was another step to cater for diverse learners.

Career guidance and counseling programs were also introduced (in the 1960s) to support those who need help in planning their career and educational paths. The program, however, was only a co-curricular activity which served a part of the student population. Later, in 1996, the program developed into a full-scale guidance and counseling program when a policy of one full-time counselor for every 500 students was implemented (Kementerian Pelajaran, 1996). This development, however, resulted in the career guidance program being reduced to a small fraction within a very broad range of guidance and counseling programs. Consequently, the career guidance program is no longer able to meet students’ needs.

4.2. The Career Guidance Program and Its Challenges

Current data indicate that the number of at-risk students in Malaysian secondary schools is on the increase. Students considered to be at-risk are in danger of completing school with very little knowledge and no skills. Some may even drop out of school although it was mandatory for every child in Malaysia to stay in school for eleven years; six years in primary education and five years in secondary. At-risk students normally (a) show behavioral problems in classroom, (b) have poor grades and test scores, (c) have low academic learning motivation, (d) show chronic absenteeism, (e) have parents who only completed secondary education, (f) are of lower socioeconomic background, and (g) have low career awareness. School guidance teachers, educators and parents are facing a challenge to develop skills that will prepare the at-risk students to pursue career options and eventually make them marketable to future employers as they are not ready for such a task (Amla Salleh, 2010; Mohd. Sani Ismail et al, 2009). Looking at the services provided by the career guidance program in school is appropriate and timely.

Person-environment theory (Holland, 1989) explains that the majority of students who appear unmotivated in learning, have low academic achievement, are at-risk students, and those with behavioral problems are those whose interests and talents are incongruent with the school environment which is very much academically oriented. As students’ interests are diverse, only students with an academic orientation would have a chance to realize their potential and experience success. Overt behavior such as absenteeism and being unmotivated are expected behaviors in an incongruent situation.

It is an irony that students’ needs have increased but the career guidance service has shrunk as the result of the recent development in guidance and counseling mentioned earlier. An analysis of recent studies of school career guidance programs highlights issues and problems faced by the career guidance programs in carrying out programs for students (Rorlinda, 2009; Noraini, 2009: Mohd Sani, 2009). The analysis has outlined several major challenges faced by the career guidance programs in schools;

Among the critical issues that are being highlighted are that the scope of counseling teachers’ responsibilities is very broad and a lack of understanding of the importance of career guidance among school administrators. There are often no qualified career counselors and there is no standard which monitors the quality of the services rendered.

School Guidance and Counseling Teachers’ guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education spelt out 26 categories of responsibilities for secondary school counselors who are called counseling teachers. For primary school counseling teachers there are 20 categories of responsibilities. A career guidance program falls into only two categories among the long list of the counseling teachers’ responsibilities (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2006).

As a result, counseling teachers typically opt for big group activities. As there is often no full-time qualified career counselor all career guidance activities have to be planned and carried out by counseling teachers. Consequently only a few activities were managed to be carried out. Another critical issue which was found by Noraini (2009) was that there was no standard of career guidance practice which resulted in inconsistency of programs implemented among schools. The number and the type of career guidance activities varied from school to school and they depended largely on the initiative of the counseling teachers and the attitude of the schools’ principals. Some school principals/administrators who failed to understand the importance of career guidance even perceived career guidance activities as disruptions to the academic learning process. The issue of career guidance programs being
sidelined is also compounded by the incompetence of counseling teachers. Many of them admit that they do not have any training in career guidance and they have no confidence in running career guidance programs. As career guidance programs are only supportive programs and are optional, only small groups of students benefit from the programs. Those who have initiative will volunteer to attend or participate in the already limited number of career guidance activities (Amla Salleh, 2010). Although most of counseling teachers understand the impact of career guidance program on students’ career development due to all the constrain they can only afford limited service to a small group of students.

The challenges faced by career guidance programs in schools evidently require a change in mindset among policy makers and practitioners to make a change in career guidance practice.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined aspects of career guidance related to its contribution in addressing various learning issues which are rooted in students’ diverse talents and abilities and the status of school career guidance programs in Malaysia, particularly the problems of low achievers who need immediate attention. This paper concludes that the abundance of empirical evidence on the impact of career intervention programs on students’ career development which is related to learning problems implying that the present status of the school career guidance in Malaysia has to be revamped, a new approach in providing a career guidance service is unavoidable and new thinking is timely. To empower the present career guidance service requires political will that will see a new policy and larger funding for the running of the program to honor the diverse clients.

References


