Senior high school career planning: what students want

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Abstract

This study used the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey to assess the career planning needs of 2360 senior high school students in Southern Alberta, Canada. This article examines how senior high school students perceive the relevance of career planning, who they feel comfortable approaching for help with career planning, and what help they would like during their career planning. Results indicated that career planning is important to high school students and they are likely to approach their parents first for help with career planning. Students in grades 10 through 12 indicated that specific information regarding courses, post-secondary information and careers would be helpful. Grade 12 students also expressed a desire for improved career counselling and increased work experience. Implications for teachers, school counsellors, parents and community services are discussed.

Introduction

Career exploration is important during adolescence as adolescents begin to engage in self-exploration and explore potential career options (Dupont & Gingras 1991; Gati & Saka 2001; Julien 1999; Super 1990). The process of career exploration and decision making can be a particularly stressful time in an adolescents' life (Taveira et al 1998). In reaction to this stress, adolescents may attempt to place the responsibility for making a career decision onto others and may even delay or avoid making a choice, which could ultimately lead to a less than optimal decision (Gati & Saka 2001). Larson and Majors (1998) suggested that affective distress associated with career decision making among adolescents may be adaptive because it increases their motivation to seek help, thus decreasing the chances for uninformed decisions. Career planning programs may reduce adolescents' stress during career exploration and decision making. The process of developing career planning programs begins with a needs assessment specific to the career planning needs of adolescents. The purpose of this study was to examine: (a) how important career planning is to adolescents in high school, (b) which individuals senior high school

students are most likely to approach for information and advice about career planning, and (c) what senior high school students want for their career planning. This article will present an overview of current career planning programs in Southern Alberta high schools, and a review of the literature regarding how important career planning is to adolescents, who adolescents feel comfortable approaching for help in their career planning, and what they perceive as their career planning needs. The method and results of this study follow, along with a discussion of the results including implications for school counsellors, teachers, parents and community services.

Background to the study

For the purpose of this study, career planning may be defined as the process through which students come to make career-related decisions. High school career planning in Southern Alberta, Canada generally involves formal career planning such as taking a mandatory 'Career and life management' (CALM) course in Grade 11 and seeking information regarding post-secondary education and financial assistance from a school guidance counsellor. CALM teachers are classroom teachers who instruct high school students on health, wellness and life skills such as financial planning and career planning. School guidance counsellors are teachers who provide information about course planning, post-secondary education and financial assistance. Students may take part in work experience programs and may have the opportunity to attend job fairs. Some high schools may have a career information library. The career planning process may also involve informal means such as considering a number of different occupations based on interests and skills and discussing one's career plans with a variety of individuals (eg parents, friends, teachers, people working in the field, etc).

Super (1990) suggests that career planning becomes significant during late adolescence and early adulthood. During this time, senior high school students enter a time in their lives when seeking career information and becoming aware of their vocational interests is a major developmental task (Erickson 1966, cited in Kracke 1997). Hiebert et al (1998) conducted a study that examined junior high school students' reports of their guidance counselling needs and found that three of the students' top five needs pertained to career concerns. Hutchinson and Bottorff (1986) found that 89 per cent of high school students reported career counselling to be a priority. Readiness to engage in career exploration appears to vary from student to student. Some factors that may account for this variability include self-esteem, ego strength, openness (Grotevant 1987, cited in Kracke 1997) and decision-making style (Blustein 1989). Individuals who are more cognitively oriented and systematic in making decisions may be more likely to engage in career exploration (Blustein 1989).

Research also suggests that adolescents are capable of making responsible and effective career-related decisions and that this ability improves over time. Lewis (1981) found a positive relationship between adolescents' age and decision-making capabilities, such as an increased awareness of the risks and implications involved in making a decision, a tendency to seek more advice from adults or peers, and an

increased awareness of the implications of receiving advice from someone with vested interests. A more recent study by Bregman and Killen reported that 'adolescents and young adults support responsible vocational decisions that nurture personal growth and that they disapprove of self-indulgent choices concerned with short-range goals' (1999, p 269).

Information used by adolescents in making decisions about their future career includes attitudes and beliefs acquired during childhood, including specific information provided by a number of sources, including parents, siblings, other family members, family friends, peers, guidance counsellors, teachers, school and public library resources, the mass media and government career centres (Julien 1999). Adolescents appear to approach certain individuals such as friends, teachers and family members more frequently because of their availability rather than because the adolescents believe that these individuals will be of most help in their career exploration (Taviera et al 1998).

Parents have been cited as a strong influential factor in their children's career decision making (Middleton & Loughead 1993; Sebald 1989). This influence may have both positive and negative effects on adolescent career decision making (Rainey & Borders 1997; Young et al 1997). Parent–adolescent factors, such as feeling a sense of connectedness and attachment to parents, have been found to be beneficial for adolescent career exploration (Blustein et al 1991; Ketterson & Blustien 1997). In addition, parents who enjoy their work and share this enjoyment with their children help them to learn positive work values (Morrow 1995). Contrary to these positive influences, parental influence may have a less beneficial impact on adolescents' career exploration and decision making when it is characterised by non-involvement, indifference or negative involvement (Middleton & Loughead 1993). This may create barriers for adolescents who are attempting to achieve their own career goals (Middleton & Loughead 1993). Adolescents' perceptions of parental expectations have also been shown to have an influence on educational aspirations (Mau et al 1998). Other parental factors such as educational and occupational status, attitudes and personal biases towards their own and others' occupation(s), financial concerns, rules and expectations may affect the career information passed on to their adolescents (Rainey & Borders 1997; Young et al 1997). Additionally, adolescents who are overly dependant on their parents may eliminate potential career paths (Rainey & Borders 1997). Thus engaging in healthy separation from one's parent(s) during adolescence may be an important part of career development.

Related to this experience of parental separation may be the formation and maintenance of close peer relationships. Felsman and Blustein (1999) examined the role of peer relationships in career development in individuals from age 17 to 22 and found that attachment to peers was positively associated with environmental exploration and progress in committing to career choices. Felsman and Blustein proposed that the development of close peer relationships is an important part of engaging in healthy separation from one's family. They suggested that, as adolescents slowly detach themselves from the security provided by their parent(s) and seek to develop close peer relationships, they may develop a sense of security needed to engage in career exploration and decision making.

Although students have expressed interest in career planning and have been reported to seek support from parents and friends, students have expressed dissatisfaction with the current system of career counselling (Alexitch & Page 1997; Aluede & Imonikhe 2002; Hutchinson & Bottorff 1986; Tomini & Page 1992). Alexitch and Page found that less than one-third of students reported having received information concerning career preparation and opportunities available in a specific field and general information about various universities and their programs from their high school guidance counsellors. A reason for this may be that 'counsellors usually work in-depth with a small percentage of their caseload and see the other students only for schedule changes and registration once a year' (Lehmanowsky 1991, p 385). Alexitch and Page also found that students reported being able to obtain career-related information from their high school teachers and that this advice was significantly more useful than the advice they had received from their high school guidance counsellors. Other studies have found that students are not satisfied with the types of services they receive from school guidance counsellors (Alexitch & Page 1997; Hutchinson & Bottorff 1986; Tomini & Page 1992). Hutchinson and Bottorff found large discrepancies between the services students reported needing and the services they actually received, of which the most significant was career counselling. Of the students who reported having needed career counselling in high school (89%), 40% of students indicated that they had received career counselling and 20% of students who required college information reported having received it.

Julien (1999) recently conducted a study on 399 students in two Canadian secondary schools. Students faced significant barriers to career planning, including 40% of students not knowing where to go for help with career decision making, 39.7% believing they needed to go to too many different places for the information they required, 59.7% finding it difficult to locate all the information they needed to make a career decision, and 37.6% not knowing where to get the answers to questions about their future. Students also reported not knowing what grades (38.3%) or courses (38%) they needed to achieve their career goals, and over half (57%) of the students required more information about financial assistance for further education. It also appeared that this lack of career information was not for a lack of trying on the part of the adolescents: 76.6% of these students reported that they had tried to get their questions answered, and of those that did not, 18% stated their reason for not doing so was because 'it was too difficult, or that there was insufficient information available' (Julien 1999, p 42). Julien pointed out that a potential reason for such feelings of anxiety was that many of the adolescents did not understand the process of career decision making. Thus, it appears students may have a variety of career planning needs that may not be met by current career planning systems.

Hiebert et al (2001) asserted that the development of an effective and comprehensive guidance and counselling program begins with a comprehensive assessment of student needs. Hearing directly from the students, rather than inferring what it is that they need, not only helps to makes the process more relevant for the students, but it can help to ensure that students' actual needs are being met (Hiebert et al 2001). Unfortunately, using the results of student needs assessments is not a

common practice in the development of many school programs (Hiebert et al 1998; Hutchinson & Bottorff 1986). More commonly, administration, teaching staff and other adults are the sources of information for program planning and tend to have the most influence on adolescents' career planning (Hiebert et al 1998, Pyne et al 2002). Therefore, this research examines the career planning needs of senior high school students, specifically the importance of career planning to students at this time in their lives, who they would approach for help with career planning, and their perceptions of what would be most helpful during their career planning.

Research design and method

The Comprehensive Career Needs Survey (CCNS; Magnusson & Bernes 2001) was developed to assess the career needs of junior high and senior high school students in Southern Alberta, Canada. The CCNS consisted of five different forms: junior high and senior high school students, classroom teachers, 'Career and life management' (CALM) teachers or health teachers/school counsellors, administrators and parents. The form used in this research was the one created for senior high school students. Surveys were supplied to senior high schools in Southern Alberta, Canada. Students completed their questionnaires in approximately thirty minutes during school hours. The survey asked for sociodemographic information and consisted of questions evaluating students' career education and support needs. Topics included perceived resources and needs, educational needs, and future goals and aspirations. The questions required both open-ended and closed-ended responses. In total, 52 schools out of 54 schools receiving the surveys returned completed forms.

Respondents

This article explores the responses of 2941 senior high school students to the senior high school form of the CCNS survey. This large sample of students is representative of schools in Southern Alberta, Canada. Sociodemographic information was divided into four categories: age, grade, town size and school size (see Table 1). Respondents were in grades 10 to 12 and ranged in age from 15 to 19. The majority of the respondents (92.5%) attended schools with student populations of 100 to 500. The majority of respondents (82.8%) lived in towns with populations of 1000 to 10 000.

Table 1: Senior high respondents

Students' age	n (%)
15	758 (25.9)
16	969 (33.1)
17	935 (32)
18	238 (8.1)
19	26 (0.9)
Students' grade	**n (%)**
10	1072 (36.3)
11	957 (32.7)
12	897 (30.7)
School size	**n (%)**
<100	16 (0.7)
100–500	2201 (92.5)
500–1000	33 (1.4)
>1000	130 (5.5)
Town size	**n (%)**
<1000	177 (7.4)
1000–10 000	1072 (82.8)
>10 000	232 (9.7)

Questions and data analysis

Four specific survey items from the senior high school questionnaire were used for this research:

1. How important is career planning to you at this time in your life? (Choices included 'very important', 'quite important', 'slightly important' and 'not at all important'.)

2. If career planning is not very important to you now, when might it become important to you?

3. Please rank (1st, 2nd or 3rd choice) the people you would feel most comfortable approaching for help with your career planning. (Choices included classroom teachers, CALM teacher, school counsellor, parent(s), other relatives, friends, someone working in the field, other people I know and trust, no-one).

4. If career planning is important to you, what would be most helpful to you right now in your career planning?

Analyses

For the closed-ended questions, frequency counts and percentages were used to describe senior high school students' responses. Chi square analyses were conducted in order to determine differences between various demographic subsets of the student sample (ie age, grade, town size and school size). Only statistically significant differences are reported ($p < 0.01$). For the open-ended questions, a constant comparison process was used to verify themes. A member of the research team randomly selected twenty items from each grade, and potential themes emerging from each survey were recorded. If a new theme emerged, it was compared to the previous samples and reviewed as to its relevancy to other themes. When it appeared no new themes were emerging, the researcher reviewed all of the compiled data and sorted each statement into the relevant themes. Themes were then validated by three individuals who were not part of the research team.

Findings

Importance of career planning

Overall, senior high school students rated career planning to be either 'very important' or 'quite important' at this time in their lives (see Table 2). As can be seen in Table 2, the importance of career planning increased as age increased. A similar relationship was found for grade, with Grade 11 and Grade 12 students rating career planning as more important than Grade 10 students. Chi-square analyses revealed significant results for age χ^2 ($6, N = 2878$) $= 109.64, p = .00$) and grade χ^2 ($12, N = 2877$) $= 111.33, p = .000$). Senior high school students who did not believe career planning was very important at this time indicated it may become

more important 'when I graduate from university' and 'when I am ready to work'. In addition to the above themes, Grade 11 students who saw career planning as being either 'not at all important' or only 'slightly important' stated that it would become important 'next year', 'later', 'when I'm a bit older' or 'after high school'. Although the majority of students in Grade 12 viewed career planning as either being 'very important' or 'quite important' at this time in their lives, those who did not indicated that it would become more important 'when I have a family'. These results indicate that students who did not find career planning to be important believed that it may become important sometime in their future.

Table 2: Age and importance of career

Age	Very important n (%)	Quite important n (%)	Slightly important n (%)	Not at all important n (%)	Total n (%)
15	123 (16.5)	292 (39.2)	277 (37.2)	53 (7.1)	745 (100)
16	203 (21.3)	404 (42.5)	279 (29.3)	65 (6.8)	951 (100)
17	293 (31.8)	380 (41.2)	196 (21.3)	53 (5.7)	922 (100)
18	85 (36.3)	91 (38.9)	39 (16.7)	19 (8.1)	234 (100)
19	8 (30.8)	11 (42.3)	6 (23.1)	1 (3.8)	26 (100)
Total	191 (27.2)	797 (27.2)	1174 (40.9)	721 (24.7)	2878 (100)

Students' comfort levels in seeking help with career planning

In rank order, the individuals that the senior high students reported being most comfortable approaching for help with career planning were parents, relatives, someone working in the field, friends, school counsellors, teachers, other people I know and trust, and CALM teachers (see Table 3). Results of the chi-square analyses are presented in Table 4.

Table 3: Individuals high school students feel most comfortable approaching for career planning help (top three choices)

	First choice n (%)	Second choice n (%)	Third choice n (%)
Parent(s)	1252 (46.9)	492 (18.4)	275 (10.3)
Relatives	154 (5.8)	342 (13.0)	341 (12.9)
Someone working in the field	297 (11.2)	348 (13.1)	469 (17.7)
Friends	295 (11.1)	469 (17.6)	416 (15.7)
School counsellor	286 (9.7)	412 (14.0)	274 (9.3)
Teachers	132 (5.0)	262 (9.9)	275 (10.4)
Other people I know and trust	101 (3.8)	170 (6.5)	281 (10.7)
CALM teacher	68 (2.6)	140 (5.3)	153 (5.8)
No-one	50 (1.9)	23 (0.9)	80 (3.1)

Overall, senior high school students indicated that they were the most comfortable approaching their parent(s) for help with career planning. Friends were also rated highly as individuals that senior high students would approach for help with career planning. The results also indicate that as grade and age increase senior high students are less likely to approach their friends for help with their career planning. The students indicted that they were very likely to approach someone working in the field for help with career planning. Grade 12 students were more likely than Grade 10 and Grade 11 students to approach someone working in the field.

Table 4: Chi square analyses

Sources of help	Age				Grade			
	χ^2	df	N	p	χ^2	df	N	p
Friends	27.34	12	2654	.007	19.19	6	2654	.004
Relatives	29.22	12	2634	.004	19.60	6	2634	.003
Field worker					17.54	6	2650	.007
Counsellor	104.32	12	2628	.000	19.23	6	2628	.000
CALM teacher	26.15	12	2623	.010	26.74	6	2623	.000
Trusted others	36.07	12	2628	.000				

Overall, school counsellors were rated fourth as someone that students would approach for help with career planning. The percentage of students who chose their school counsellor as someone that they would feel comfortable approaching increased as grade level increased. A similar trend was found for age, with the older students being more likely to rate their school counsellor as someone that they felt comfortable in approaching than the younger students. 'Other relatives' were ranked fifth when it came to whom senior high students would approach for help with career planning. It appears that the higher the age and grade level of the student, the less likely they were to approach other relatives for help with career planning.

Overall, senior high students indicated they were not likely to approach their classroom teachers for help with career planning. They rated other people they know and trust as seventh for help with career planning. The oldest students were more likely to approach someone that they know and trust for help with career planning than were the younger students. Only 13.7% of the students indicated that they would approach their CALM teacher for help with career planning. As grade increased, students were less likely to choose their CALM teacher as someone that they felt comfortable approaching for help with career planning. An examination of students' age revealed that 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds appeared to be less likely than 15-year-olds, 16-year-olds and 19-year-olds to approach their CALM teacher for help with career planning. This is an intriguing finding worthy of further investigation because 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds were most likely to have completed the CALM course offered in their school. Perhaps these students were not likely to approach their CALM teacher for help because they had already obtained

the information the CALM teacher had to offer, and were seeking information from other sources.

Overall, the results of the CCNS indicated that senior high school students were most likely to approach their parents first for help with career planning, followed by relatives, someone working in the field, friends, school counsellors, teachers, 'other people I know and trust' and, lastly, CALM teachers. This may suggest that students are looking for support (eg family, relatives and friends) and purposeful guidance (eg someone working in the field, school counsellors and teachers) when approaching others for help with career planning.

What students want

Varying themes were found related to what students think would be most helpful in their career planning. Few differences were noted between grades. In response to the open-ended questions, Grade 10 students indicated that they had 'a desire for more information, such as career fairs and/or information meetings' and a concern for 'more information regarding courses, post-secondary education and careers' in their career planning. Grade 11 and 12 students shared the same overall concern for receiving more information. Additionally, Grade 12 students indicated a desire for 'better counselling in the way of information and advice' and a concern for receiving 'job experience'. Overall, it appeared that all senior high school students believed that concrete information regarding courses, post-secondary information and careers would be helpful. However, a difference between Grade 10 and Grade 12 students was noted in that Grade 12 students expressed a desire for improved career counselling and increased work experience.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that career planning is important to high school students. They are seeking out information and advice from a variety of different individuals, and are looking for professional guidance and direction to help them with their career planning. These results, coupled with previous research that has found that adolescents are prepared to make career-related decisions (Bregman & Killen 1999; Lewis 1981; Mau et al 1998) re-emphasises the importance of career planning at the high school level (Hiebert et al 2001). Senior high students who do not believe career planning to be very important at this time believe that it will become important at some point in the near future. Thus it appears that, although these students may not consider career development a priority at this time, they appear to recognise that it may become a priority in the future. Programming that helps students to see that career planning and development is a life-long process rather than a 'stage' or single decision that needs to be made may help to engage students in the continual process of career exploration.

Students indicated that they would feel most comfortable approaching their parent(s) for help with career planning. Parents appear to be in a position to provide career-related information and support. Therefore, this may be a good place to start improving career-related services for adolescents. It is important to examine how to

provide parents with the proper information and knowledge to best assist their adolescents in their career planning. Training parents to assist their adolescent with career-related decision making may help them to understand their child's perspectives and career needs, provide appropriate support and encouragement, and enhance the natural alliance that exists between parent and child.

Students indicated that they were comfortable approaching their friends for help with career planning. Although peers are not likely to be a source of career-related information, they have been found to be a source of support during the career planning process (Felsman & Blustein 1999). As part of a more formal career planning process, educating students on how to provide support and encouragement to peers may be indicated.

This study also found that as students aged they moved beyond their parents and friends and looked to alternative sources for career-related information such as someone working in the field and guidance counsellors. If students are able to increase the breadth of their sources of information, it may help to engage them more fully in the process and may enable them to make independent and informed decisions. Probably most encouraging was the finding that the vast majority of the students indicated that they had someone that they felt comfortable in approaching for help with their career planning, regardless of who that was.

Students indicated that they were not as likely to approach teachers for help with career planning, especially CALM teachers. Students may perceive that teachers are helpful in regards to specific course content, and may not be a source of help during their career planning. Students may not recognise the connection between the courses they are taking and career planning. There may also be a difference in students' expectations of what a teacher may be able to help them with: students may be seeking support for their career plans, where teachers may provide information. The fact that teachers may not be trained in career planning may also contribute to students not approaching them for help. These results indicate that integrating career planning into course content and providing teachers with training in career planning may be helpful to students.

Students from all grades indicated a desire for more information regarding courses, post-secondary education and careers. These finding are in line with the findings of previous research that students may not perceive to have acquired satisfactory amounts of information about career preparation and opportunities available in a specific field, general information about various universities and/or colleges and their programs, and information regarding what grades or courses they need in order to achieve their career goals (Alexitch & Page 1997; Hutchinson & Bottorff 1986; Julien 1999). It is important to note that these results do not necessarily mean that this information is not available to students. Rather, it suggests that students may require more formalised instruction as to how to seek out and use available information. These results highlight the importance of helping adolescents with the actual process of career exploration, including helping them to sort through all of the available information. This point is further supported by the studies finding that Grade 12 students believed they would benefit from better

counselling in the way of information and advice (eg Alexitch & Page 1997; Aluede & Imonikhe 2002).

Although a mandatory CALM program is currently being delivered in Southern Alberta high schools, the results of this study indicate a need for a more comprehensive career curriculum. A comprehensive career curriculum would address students' career planning needs by providing students with career information tailored to their developmental needs delivered by individuals trained in career planning who would support them throughout their career planning process. A comprehensive career curriculum would meet students' needs for greater emphasis on career planning at the high school level, integrate career into curriculum subjects, provide a foundation on which to develop career information seeking and career planning skills, and involve a number of individuals whom high school students deem to be important in their career planning (eg parents, friends, teachers and individuals who work in the field). A comprehensive career curriculum would address both formal and informal means by which students obtain help for their career planning. Parent education and peer education would be important components, as these are the individuals students are most likely to approach first for help with career planning. Teachers with specific training in career planning would understand the importance of providing information as well as professional guidance, and would be more likely to meet the needs of individual students. A career planning curriculum that encouraged teachers to integrate career planning into subjects may increase the likelihood that students would approach teachers for help with career planning because their help would be perceived as more beneficial. Integration of community resources would also be an important component of a comprehensive career curriculum (eg work experience opportunities and mentoring by individuals who work in the field). Career planning information and support provided to students by trained individuals that integrates as many aspects of career planning as possible would be helpful to students at this stage in their career planning process.

Limitations of the study

The results of this research may not be generalisable to students outside of Southern Alberta, Canada. The study was conducted with students residing in Southern Alberta, Canada in centers with populations of 500 to 75 000 people. High school students in Southern Alberta, Canada receive a CALM course, which may differ from career planning courses in other school districts. The study did not focus on socioeconomic, gender or cultural factors, which may affect students' career planning needs. In addition, as with all self-reported data, the CCNS (Magnusson & Bernes 2001) collected students' perceptions of their issues regarding career development at that time. Therefore, there is always the risk that such data may not be accurate or based on fact.

Directions for future research

The students who indicated that career planning was not very important at the time of the research believed that career planning would become important at some point

in the near future. Future researchers may want to examine how the relevance of career planning develops for these students over time. Socioeconomic, gender or cultural factors affecting senior high school students' career planning needs need to be explored. Students reported they would approach their parents and other relatives first for help with career planning. Future researchers may want to explore how we can best assist parents and relatives in optimally providing for the students' career development needs. Students reported they would be least likely to approach their CALM teacher for help with career planning, indicating that future research examining the reasons for this reluctance may best assist in program planning and teacher training. In addition to requesting more career-related information, senior high school students indicated that they would like to have more assistance in disseminating information that is already available. Therefore, further research is needed to examine the barriers students face in using the existing information, as well as to examine factors that would facilitate this process.

Conclusion

The CCNS was developed to examine the career planning needs of students in Southern Alberta, Canada. The purpose of the study was to examine (a) how important career planning is to adolescents in high school, (b) which individuals senior high school students are most likely to approach for information and advice about career planning, and (c) what senior high school students want in order to enhance school career planning programs. The findings of this study align with previous research in that career planning was found to be important to high school students; they are seeking out information and advice from a variety of different individuals; and they are looking for professional guidance and direction to help them with their career planning. The findings of this study enhance our understanding of high school career planning in that high school students want more specific career information and support for their career planning. The results suggest the need for a comprehensive career curriculum. Individuals trained in career planning would provide specific career information and support tailored to students' developmental levels. Educating parents and peers on how best to support students during their career planning and involving community resources would be helpful to students throughout their career planning process.

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