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Occupational Aspirations of Students in Grades Seven to Twelve

During adolescence, individuals begin to plan for their future career by considering a number of occupational choices. Counsellors, parents, and educators may be better able to assist adolescents in their exploration of occupational options, help them seek career-related information, and obtain support for their career plans by developing a greater understanding of adolescents' occupational aspirations. The purpose of this research was to examine the occupational aspirations and the rationales students provided. It is anticipated that the outcome of this research may be used to assist future career program planning for junior and senior high students. This paper presents a review of the literature related to adolescent occupational choice, followed by a description of the research conducted with 3,562 junior high students and 2,941 senior high students in Southern Alberta utilizing the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey (CCNS; Magnusson and Bernes, 2002), and a discussion of the results.

Literature Review

Stable career preferences may emerge as early as kindergarten (Trice and King, 1991). Ginzberg (1952) found that these career preferences primarily centered around interests. Recent research has shown that interests continue to play a primary role in the selection and rejection of occupations throughout childhood (Trice, Hughes, Odom, Woods, and McClellan, 1995). Although children's initial career preferences may have consisted of "fantasy" choices (Ginzberg, 1952), adolescents may begin to narrow their occupational choices as they gain a sense of what is "realistic" as a future occupation (Gottfredson, 1996; Watson, Quatman and Edler, 2002).

A number of external factors have been found to influence adolescents' career aspirations, including gender, parental influence, socioeconomic status, and early school experiences. The role of gender in adolescent occupations has been given much attention (Wahl and Blackhurst, 2000). Danziger (1983) found that socioeconomic background and parental expectations tended to influence adolescent girls' career expectations, while ability, academic achievement, and opportunity tended to influence adolescent boys' career expectations. McMahon and Patton (1997) found that boys demonstrated a greater awareness of jobs and industry and were more interested in work tasks and work conditions than were girls, who appeared to be more concerned with work environment. Combining career and family life also has been found to be an influencing factor in adolescent girls' career aspirations (McMahon and Patton, 1997).

Parents may influence their child's occupational interests in a number of ways. First, parents tend to act as career role models (Shulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter, 1984). Children tend to relate to parental occupations, especially the mother's (Trice and Knapp, 1992). Mullis, Mullis, and Gerwhels (1998) found that students' career aspirations tended to match their parents' occupation. For example, students whose parents were in unskilled occupations tended to be more interested in Realistic occupations, while students whose parents were in professional or skilled occupations tended to be more interested in Artistic, Social or Conventional occupations (Mullis et al., 1998). These findings highlight the influence of parental role modeling on children's occupational interests.

Family socioeconomic status may also affect parents' perceived efficacy and academic aspirations, which then may affect their children's engagement in occupational activities (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli, 2001). Adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have access to career resources and may not efficiently utilize available resources as those from a higher socioeconomic background (Valadez, 1998). As a result, students may have the ability to achieve their career aspirations, but may not aspire to high expectations because they may not have the perceived efficacy nor may they have the adequate resources to achieve them.

Early school experiences also may influence students' occupational aspirations. Students' future educational and career aspirations may be affected by the attention they receive from teachers (Wall, Covell, and MacIntyre, 1999). For example, girls at single sex schools were found to have higher career aspirations than did girls and boys at co-ed schools, primarily due to receiving a greater amount of individual attention from teachers (Watson, Quatman, and Edler, 2002). Adolescent girls who had higher academic achievement were found to contemplate a wider variety of career aspirations (Danziger, 1983).

A review of the literature revealed that adolescents have a variety of occupational aspirations based primarily on interests, these aspirations narrowed and become more realistic as they mature, and there are a number of factors that may affect their occupational aspirations (e.g., gender, parental influences, socioeconomic status, and school experiences). The purpose of this research was to examine junior high and senior high students' occupational aspirations and rationales for their occupational aspirations. Determining developmental differences and/or similarities is important in order to inform future program planning. Due to that fact career planning programs have a direct impact on students' lives,

it is important to involve them in this process. This research targeted the primary source for junior high students' occupational aspirations—the students themselves.

Method

The CCNS (Magnusson and Bernes, 2002) was developed to assess the career needs of junior high and senior high school students in Southern Alberta. The CCNS consisted of five different forms. The form used in this research was the one distributed to 54 junior and senior high schools in the Southern Alberta region. In total, 52 out of the 54 schools returned completed forms. Students took approximately 30 minutes to complete their forms 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, future goals, and aspirations. The survey required participants to complete both closed and open-ended questions.

Respondents

This article explores the responses from 3, 562 junior high students and 2, 941 senior high students. Participants included grade seven (n = 1147, 32.2%), grade eight (n = 1214, 34.1%), grade nine (n = 1195, 33.6%), grade ten (n = 1072, 36.6%), grade 11 (n = 957; 32.7%), and grade 12 (n = 897; 30.7%) students.

Questions

Two specific open-ended survey items were used for this research:

1. If you had to start work tomorrow, and assuming that you had the proper education or training, what kind of work would you most likely choose?
2. Why would you choose that kind of work?

Data Analysis

A constant comparison process was used to verify themes in the open-ended questions. Twenty randomly selected surveys were obtained from each grade, and themes emerging from these surveys were recorded by a member of the research team. New themes were compared to previous themes and reviewed for appropriate fit. When it appeared that data saturation had been reached, the researcher sorted each theme into relevant categories. To check for validity, themes were then reviewed by three individuals who were not part of the research team.

Results

Aspirations

Grade seven. In response to the question “If you had to start work tomorrow and assuming you had the proper education or training, what kind of work would you most likely choose?”, the following seven themes emerged from the responses of grade seven students: (a) professional occupations (e.g., lawyer, computers, doctor, nurse, architect, counsellor), (b) glamour occupations (e.g., athlete, actress, fashion designer, chasing tornadoes), (c) trade occupations (e.g., mechanic, carpenter), (d) occupations with children (e.g., daycare worker, teacher), (e) occupations with animals (e.g., zoologist, wildlife biologist, vet), (f) volunteer occupations, and (g) service industry occupations (e.g., chef, bed and breakfast, hairdresser).

Grade eight. Eight themes emerged from the responses of grade eight students. Seven of these categories mirrored those created by the grade seven students’. However, the new theme of law enforcement occupations emerged for the grade eight students. In comparison to the grade seven students, grade eight students listed a significantly lower number of glamour (athletic) career aspirations and a higher number of professional careers. The first reference to self-employment (e.g., open a supermarket) also appeared within the grade eight responses.

Grade nine. In addition to the themes found in grade seven and grade eight student responses, two new themes emerged from the grade nine students’ responses: (a) artistic occupations (e.g., animation, interior design) and (b) transportation occupations (e.g., trucker, pilot). In addition, the category of “service industry occupations” was expanded to “service and support occupations” in order to include occupations such as nurse’s aid, dental hygienist, and physical trainer. It should also be noted that grade nine students listed a large number of new occupations as compared to the grade seven and grade eight students, however, these new occupations fit into pre-existing themes. Grade nine students’ responses appeared to demonstrate a growing level of complexity in their schemata of various occupations.

Grade 10. In addition to previous themes, one new theme emerged from the grade ten students’ responses: broadcasting.

Grade 11. No new themes emerged from the grade 11 student responses. However, in comparison to previous responses, grade eleven students were more likely to list being self-employed or a business owner (i.e., own a coffee shop, own a business) as the type of work that they would most likely choose.

Grade 12. Although the grade twelve students' responses fell into the previous themes, there appeared to be an increase in the number of specific careers listed (e.g., x-ray technician, hospital nutrition aide, production manager at Disney). It was also found that as grade increased, the desire to work with people became a more common theme.

Overall, junior high and senior high students listed a variety of occupational aspirations that became more specific with age.

Rationales

Grade seven. In response to the question "Why would you choose that kind of work?", seven themes emerged from the responses of the grade seven students. These seven themes were: (a) they like/love the work, (b) they are skilled at the type of work and/or are good at it, (c) they find the work exciting and/or interesting, (d) money and/or financial compensation, (e) personal meaning (e.g., working with people, helping others, make a difference), (f) the challenge, and (g) parental support. These results suggested that grade seven students may base their occupational aspirations on a number of factors, including personal interest, background experience, finances, and parental encouragement. The primary rationale for grade seven students' occupational aspirations appeared to be related to personal interest (e.g., they like the work, find it exciting or interesting, desire personal meaning, and would like a challenge).

Grade eight. Compared to the grade seven students, the grade eight students' responses resulted in an increase in the number of students endorsing the theme of "the challenge."

Grade nine. No new themes emerged from the responses of grade nine students. There was a tendency for grade nine students to provide combinations of answers (e.g., my dad is a mechanic and I'm good with my hands). This combination of answers appeared to demonstrate a growing level of complexity in grade nine students' rationales for their occupational aspirations.

Grade 10. No new themes emerged from the responses of grade 10 students.

Grade 11. No new themes emerged from the responses of grade 11 students. In comparison to the grade ten students' responses, grade eleven students listed an increasing number of responses regarding personal meaning (e.g., working with people).

Grade 12. In addition to previous themes, grade twelve students' responses included the following two new themes: (a) location or being close to home and (b) quality of life (i.e. live in a small community, benefits, close to home). This suggests that grade twelve students may move beyond specific occupational aspirations, and consider other aspects of their lives as within their career aspirations.

Overall, junior high and senior high students' rationales for their occupational aspirations remained consistent, with the exception of grade 12 students considering "location" and "quality of life" as being important aspects of their career. These results will now be discussed, along with recommendations for future program planning, limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

Implications

In this research, junior high and senior high students presented a wide range of occupational aspirations and a range of rationales for these interests, which appeared to increase in complexity as grade increased. The lack of exclusion of previous themes and relatively small number of new career categories that emerged suggested that students' career preferences may be relatively stable over time. The stability of the students' rationales for their occupational aspirations from grades seven through twelve also indicated that junior high and senior high students may have based their occupational aspirations on the following core principles – interests, skill, support, and personal meaning.

Knowledge of junior high and senior high students' occupational aspirations and understanding the rationales for their choices is important in the development of career planning programs. The results of this study indicated that junior high and senior high students may think about their future more realistically and with greater depth of understanding as they age. This implies that there may be a developmental progression in the manner in which junior high and senior high students think about their career aspirations. This process may be enhanced by a career planning curriculum that begins at grade seven. Junior high and senior high students who are provided with greater opportunities to learn about their own interests and personality characteristics may develop increased self-knowledge, thus increasing their range of occupational interests. In alignment with previous research by Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes, and

Shanahan (2002), the recommendations resulting from this research are that career planning programs, involving career discussions and occupational exploration, should begin during junior high, when students' early experiences impact their future choices.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted in a rural area in the province of Alberta, in centers with populations between 500 and 75, 000 people. Results may not be generalized to junior high and senior high students beyond Southern Alberta. As well, the CCNS is a survey instrument which based its results on student self-reports, which reflect the respondents' perceptions of reality at a single moment in time. Therefore, the data collected in this survey method did not allow for in-depth exploration or reflection on individual questions.

Directions for Future Research

The variety of career aspirations reported by students suggests that an area for future research may be longitudinal research in determining aspirational versus actual career plans. Students reported a number of variables that contributed to their career aspirations (e.g., interest, skill, money, personal meaning, challenge, parental support). Further research into students' perceptions of the role these variables play in obtaining their career aspirations may be useful. Interviews with students may provide a more comprehensive understanding of their career aspirations than the survey instrument was able to provide. Investigating gender and cultural differences may provide greater understanding of individual differences that would be helpful in future program planning. Research into elementary students' perceptions of their future career may provide a more thorough understanding of a career development path throughout the school years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this research suggest that adolescents as young as 11 are thinking about their future career by considering a variety of occupational aspirations and rationales for their choices. Junior high and senior high students reported a number of rationales behind their occupational choices, including interest, meaningfulness, personal challenge, financial compensation and parental support. A comprehensive career planning curriculum beginning at grade seven is recommended to support students through this important process.

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