

Adolescents' Perceptions of Career Concern

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Introduction

The Merriam-Webster (2003) definition states that a concern is an “uneasy state of blended interest, uncertainty and apprehension”. Ginzberg and colleagues (1951) indicated a process of choosing an occupation concerning different periods of vocational choice. Super (1953; 1980) indicated that some concerns have a vocational basis and even created an instrument with an intent to measure individual’s stage of concerns in life (Super, Thompson, and Lindeman, 1988). Ginzberg (1952) and Super (1980) focused on the stage of adolescence as a critical period where students develop a sense of the future and become ready to plan and decide. Though the word ‘concern’ has been discussed by these authors, it appears that the term is anything but clear or well understood in the realm of career development.

Research has now been conducted into the number of adjustment difficulties adolescents have in relation to their career (Bibby, and Posterski, 1992; Hiebert, Collins, and Robinson, 2001; Magnusson and Bernes, 2001; Pyne and Bernes, 2002; Pyne, Bernes, Magnusson, and Poulsen, 2002) and in planning their career (Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson, and Witko, 2004). Other studies have revealed that adolescents also perceive problems about their transition from high school (Amundson, Borgen, and Trench, 1995; Borgen, and Amundson, 1995) and appear to have concerns about school and future considerations (Stratton, 2000; Violato, and Holden, 1998). Youth have garnered a great deal of research attention presumably because it is in this stage of life where individuals first begin to prepare and eventually train themselves for a future vocation. One area of needs assessment that has received very little attention is the perceptions that young people have about their own career concerns.

One attempt at categorizing student career concerns has been undertaken by Savickas and Super (1993) built upon the ideas of Super’s (1990) structural model of career choice readiness and melding them with the personality characteristics outlined in Erikson’s (1963; 1968) model of psychosocial development. Savickas and Super categorized psychosocial and vocational traits

and linked these traits to vocational development tasks with an intention to produce a Student Career Concerns Inventory for use in the research and counselling of children and adolescents. These vocational traits that support career planning, exploration and decision making in Super's (1990) model are internal locus of control, curiosity, information, identification with key figures, and self-esteem.

In the preparation of a research form of this inventory, Savickas and Super (1993) conceptually linked these vocational traits of Super's web model with the personality characteristics of hope, willpower, purpose, competence, and fidelity described in Erikson's (1963) model of psychosocial development. Thematic issues of confidence, control, conviction and competence were originally selected to denote possible career developmental tasks in the stages of childhood and adolescence (Savickas, and Super, 1993), however, Savickas (2001) suggests that these thematic issues of the growth stage might remain generally the same throughout the life-span and has chosen the issues of concern and commitment to complete the list. In short, "career concerns are highly contingent on the psychosocial context" (Savickas, 2001, p.309) and are defined by what adolescents' perceive to be personally important and essential to their development.

Though it is historically uncommon to include a lengthy discussion in the NATCON paper tradition, this review of the literature leads to an important gap in the discussion of adolescent development and career concern. Namely, the career concerns as perceived by adolescents. The purpose of this research was to examine the sources of adolescents' perceived discouragement about their career and to assess their career and educational concerns.

Method

This study is based on data from the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey (CCNS) (Magnusson, and Bernes, 2002), designed to assess the career needs of junior high and senior

high students in Southern Alberta, Canada. The CCNS used five different questionnaire forms (junior high student, senior high student, parent, teacher, administrator and counsellor) to determine stakeholders' perceptions about students' career needs. Survey forms were distributed among schools in the Southern Alberta region. Fifty-two out of fifty-four schools returned completed forms. The survey asked for sociodemographic information and consisted of questions regarding the individual evaluation of students' career education needs within each school.

Respondents

This article explores the responses of 6,481 students in Grades 7 through 12 who participated in the CCNS. Sociodemographic information in the CCNS was divided into four categories: age, grade, town size, and school size. The data obtained was divided according to the demographic of each school's community size. Participant responses were sorted according to whether a school was located in a large community (10,000 or more), a medium-sized community (more than 1,000 but less than 10,000), or a smaller community (less than 1,000). Twenty-four randomly selected responses were collected from each grade level within each community category. Of the 432 responses sampled, 72 (16%) responses were collected from each grade. The questionnaire responses were transcribed in order to examine them for emerging themes. Themes were compared within each school and across schools to ensure that data saturation had been reached for each grade. The data were once again examined in order to determine the different themes that emerged with each grade. After recording the statements and developing categories that appeared to encompass the relevant themes, the researchers reviewed all the data compiled, and sorted each statement into the relevant categories.

Question

The present study focuses on one question from the junior high and senior high student surveys. The specific survey item used for this research was the open-ended questionnaire question, “What discourages you when you think about your career?”

Data Analysis

In order to code the data, every written statement was examined and themes were extracted. Responses from the open-ended survey question were examined and coded using a constant comparison process analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The statements from the surveys were transcribed by a member of the research team. The recorded statements were recorded in the same words that the student had used; however, the labels eventually given to the themes reflected the researchers’ perspective. For example, statements related to job, financial, and physical stability corresponded to the security theme. Themes were then validated by three individuals who were not involved in conducting the research.

Results

I) Junior High Students

In response to the question “What discourages you when you think about your career?”, five main issues emerged from the responses of junior high and high-school students. A coding taxonomy was derived from analysis of the open-ended question and revealed five aggregate themes related to (a) training & education concerns, (b) security, (c) satisfaction, (d) failing, and (e) commitment.

Training and education concerns

Junior high students appeared to have specific sources of career concern related to educational, occupational, and career-related training requirements. In their own words, adolescents appeared to be looking for the “right training” and “education for [a] job” but reported that the “time & the cost” involved in attaining further training was a specific source of career concern. Overall, issues related to time, energy, and finances were perceived sacrifices associated with student's training and education concerns. Thus, students appeared apprehensive about the losses involved in meeting their learning needs.

Security

Junior high and senior high school students appeared to desire security in their future vocations and in their future career. A sense of security in one's future vocation was at times perceived to lead to a concern about their ability to obtain stability in that future. Students' perceptions revealed that their notion of “security” depended on a variety of domains, but feared that vocational, financial, and physical obstacles could threaten their sense of control over their vocational future. A loss in any one domain that is perceived to provide stability appeared to threaten students' sense of security overall. Perceived threats related to stabilizing a job and career were reported by students to be primary sources of career concern. Although students were willing to accept the existence of these real and possible problems they could encounter during their career they appeared to wonder about their ability to shoulder the responsibility for their own vocational future.

Threats to their sense of security included anything that could prevent them from obtaining stability in a job or career. The theme of security sometimes appeared to be a powerful factor for adolescents as students often reported being concerned about threats to their physical safety, which included responses about injury and even death. In summary, these responses

suggested that adolescents want to be employable, but fear, to large degree, the barriers to employability that could threaten their sense of security.

Satisfaction

Junior high students appeared to desire satisfaction in their vocations and their future, but had concerns about work that they dislike. A sense of satisfaction was at times perceived to lead to a concern about what to do with their future vocations. Sources of concern involved difficult work tasks that would be either too difficult or too boring. Thus, different types of work were perceived to be unattractive if work was viewed as potentially disappointing or unfulfilling. This was also true when the idea of work conflicted with their participation in other life roles “because [they] would not have time for other activities”. Thus, it appeared that students with these concerns lacked resilient and optimistic convictions about the meaning of work and what place work will have in their future life.

Failing

Junior high school students appeared to desire being successful in their vocations and in their future career. A sense of success in one’s future vocation was at times perceived to lead to a common concern about one’s own confidence and competence. Students appeared to have concerns related to making mistakes, job fears, and failing and appeared hesitant about performing work tasks that they perceived as unpleasant, difficult, or frightening. Students’ perceptions revealed that their notions of “success” depended on the ability to perform future tasks adequately. Forms of nervousness and anxiety accompanied responses about making mistakes and job fears which reflected specific fears related to work tasks; where responses such as “everything” and encouragement to drugs and alcohol” reflected a more general fear involved with all aspects of student’s lives and career.

Although the domain of work held a high level of salience for students with this concern, they appeared hesitant about performing work tasks that they perceived as unpleasant, difficult, or frightening. Thus, students in this study appeared to want to be successful and not to fail, but that they also had fears and doubts about their abilities to perform future tasks adequately.

Commitment

Junior high students appeared to want to learn about and participate in their vocations and in their future career. A sense of commitment in ones future vocation was at times perceived to lead to a concern about taking responsibility for their vocational and career decisions. For example, students often reported that making a commitment to one role or career decision might make it difficult to do justice to another role. Students with these concerns appeared hesitant about making a career choice that would require a commitment to that choice. Accordingly, students in this study appeared to want to make commitments in their career decisions but they also appeared confused and uncertain in making career choices

II) Senior High Students

In response to the same question “What discourages you when you think about your career?”, the majority of senior high students’ responses fell into the same five themes reported by junior high-school students. However, two additional themes were found among high school respondents, resulting in a total of seven themes overall. These seven themes were: (a) training & education concerns, (b) security, (c) satisfaction, (d) failing, (e) commitment, (f) wrong occupational choice, and (g) having to decide.

The themes of satisfaction and commitment shared the same substantive content with the additional themes of wrong occupational choice and having to decide. Nevertheless, these

students concerns appeared to be more pressing at the high school level; therefore, the urgency and the importance of these additional themes were greater. For both additional themes, students reported that they realized that the time remaining to make a career decision was quickly coming to an end.

Wrong occupational choice

Students in Grade 10 reported more difficulty with occupational tasks that they perceived to be negative, stressful, and unsatisfying. Whatever their choices were, students expressed their uncertainty about them with questions such as: “Do I really want to do that for the rest of my life?” and “What if I don’t like it?” What was unique about H.S. students, was that they appeared to have made a tentative choice and had chosen a particular occupation, but were still concerned that this choice could be the wrong one for them.

Having to decide

Students in both Grades 11 & 12 reported more difficulty with making career-related decisions since committing to a choice was now complicated by the limited time remaining to decide. Responses such as “I don’t know what to do” and “I don’t know what career to go into” expressed the frustration experienced by these students. While students appeared to be frustrated and appeared unable to state a preference, they also felt burdened by the lack of time in which to make a decision.

Discussion

Super’s life stages and substages have a strong vocational basis that resides in the domain of work. Though these patterns of vocational development tasks are important to our understanding of adolescents’ vocational development these patterns may be insufficient in

describing adolescents' career concerns. From this perspective, career concerns can encompass a broad range of issues that are distinguishable from the patterns of vocational tasks, situations and demands that condition them. While Super's stages refer to common vocational tasks, these concerns refer to typical career issues that adolescents perceive to be personally important and essential to the development of their career.

The purpose of this research was to examine the sources of junior high and senior high students' perceived discouragement and to assess their career and educational concerns. The results of this research suggest that junior high and senior high students perceived a variety of concerns regarding their career. Students indicated that they were discouraged by factors related to seven themes. These seven themes were: (a) training and education concerns, (b) security, (c) satisfaction, (d) failing, and (e) commitment, (f) wrong occupational choice, and (e) having to decide.

The results of this research appears support to the thematic issues of concern, control, conviction, competence, and commitment as originally described by Savickas and Super (1993). However, where the thematic issues proposed by Savicaks and Super appear to be the foundation for possible career development tasks throughout life, the career concerns of adolescents appear to be the student populations' expression of these tasks concerning this stage of transition in their lives.

Other than secondary students' shared transition concerns, two additional themes, "wrong occupational choice" and "having to decide", were found among high school respondents. This may indicate that the high school students realize that the time remaining to make a career decision is quickly coming to an end, but feel unprepared for their post-high-school transition. Left unaddressed, personal concerns that accumulated to an unmanageable degree could make the transition to work or to further education after secondary school difficult.

Limitations of the Study

In regard to the qualitative approach, the nature of the research question allowed the researcher freedom to explore a broad range of responses related to the topic of career concern. The research was conducted in a rural area, in the province of Alberta, in centers with populations of 500-75 000 people. While the focus of this research allowed an exploratory analysis of adolescents' perceptions of their career concerns, the results may not be generalized to junior high and senior high students beyond Southern Alberta. In addition, the data collected in this survey reflect respondents' perceptions of reality a certain moment in time and do not allow for personalization or elaboration on the individual question surveyed.

Areas for Future Research

Further study is recommended on the existence of adolescents' core career concerns. To date, relatively few research studies have attempted to obtain students' perceptions about their career concerns.

Additional themes were reported by senior high students, indicating that longitudinal research to determine developmental changes in adolescents' career concerns may be useful. This research was based solely on self-reports of survey respondents, and although the range of participants' responses of uncovered themes was expansive, further research may be necessary to verify these themes among different populations in different locales.

Summary

In conclusion, the results of this research revealed that adolescents experience a range of concerns that relate to their post-high-school transition and future career. Results indicate that these students' career concerns include distinct transition and career adjustment difficulties related to (a) training & education concerns, (b) security, (c) satisfaction, (d) failing, (e)

commitment, (f) wrong occupational choice, and (g) having to decide. The results suggested that an integrated career planning curriculum beginning at the junior high level may be helpful to address students' unanswered questions and unaddressed career concerns. By involving adolescents' own perceptions of their career concerns, the career-planning process may become more relevant and students may be better prepared for the post-high-school transition.

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