

"CLEARING THE TRACK". PRIORITY AND PROCESS IN ASSISTING STUDENTS TO CHOOSE CAREERS

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes a secondary school careers intervention.

The core components are systematic identification of students according to need, individual counselling, and a personalised work and training exploration programme.

The intervention fits within a comprehensive careers and transition scheme and it enhances school and community relations as well as supporting students to make meaningful career choices.

Senior secondary students who do not know what they want to do when they leave school are all too familiar and, for teachers and parents alike, unfailingly frustrating. However, it may be that we judge these perplexed and perplexing young people with the advantage of adult hindsight and without due regard to the size and complexity of the task that they have to deal with.

The easy articulation of school and work that was available to some previous generations has probably gone forever. A problem for many senior pupils today is that there is so much choice. They are confronted with a bewildering mass of alternatives, many of which have highly detailed training requirements. For instance, a student interested in mental health careers has to navigate such options as social work, counselling, psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, and each of these vocations has an array of subspecialties.

The information overload is often made more difficult by personal uncertainties, and career decisions can demand considerable self-knowledge and decisiveness. As we know, adolescence is a time of flux, of identity formation and fusion, and arguably it is the most demanding developmental period. At the time of our lives when we are most unsure we are expected to commit to highly differentiated choices which can necessitate relocating, involve lengthy training, and require significant investments of emotion and money. It is likely that most school leavers do not realise until much later the full implications of the decisions that they make in terms of salary, social status, security, and lifestyle.



The facts are that career decision-making has casualties. Included here are the 14.3% of 15-19 year olds (i.e., of the nonstudent population) who are unemployed compared with the national average of 4.6%, as shown in the Household Labour Force Survey, December 2003 quarter (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). There is an association between unemployment and poor psychological adjustment in young people and apprehensions have been expressed that it may lead to social alienation and to increased risk of suicide (Winefield, 1997). Little wonder then that teenagers often approach career decisions with significant "ambiguity, uncertainty, and stress" (Santrock, 2003, p. 422).

In the late 1980s I was involved in a careers and transition scheme at Tawa College which endeavoured to meet the needs of students who were uncertain about what they wanted to do when they left school. The essence of the scheme was the systematic identification of students needing assistance, leading to a structured sequence of counselling and work and training exploration. These provisions were available within the context of a comprehensive careers and transition programme.

All senior students (year 11-13) were surveyed at the start of the school year. They were asked to list their subjects and examination marks, state a career preference or possible area of interest, and make assessments of their requirements for vocational guidance and assistance. The completed surveys were ordered according to evidence of need. Students looking for work but with no clear career intentions and with poor academic records were placed at the top of the priority list.

The students were seen by the part-time careers advisor assigned to their year level. Initial interviews were part information gathering, part information giving, and part counselling. The usual outcome was the identification of two, three, or four areas of likely vocational interest. Referrals were then made to the Transition Assistant, a part-time ancillary staff member, who arranged visits to

work sites for interviews and observations. It was important that the visits provided an accurate view of an occupation and related to the student's ability level.

Students saw the careers advisor again when they returned to school. Reports relating to the work exploration visits were available to counsellors and these were added to individual career files. Sometimes further occupational visits were arranged but more often the follow up sessions were concerned with educational guidance (e.g., subject choices) relating to the requirements of a chosen career.

Many secondary schools have operated work experience schemes for some time and they may now be participating in the Gateway workplace learning initiative (Skill New Zealand, 2002; Tertiary Education Commission, 2004). The programme that is being discussed here is distinctive in its use of systematic surveying and screening, the availability of vocational visiting for all students, and the close connection between work exploration and individual counselling. The occupational visits were seen as a core component in career decision making, that might lead on to periods of sustained work experience if indicated.

In an early paper, Hopson (1968) asserts that we need to be clear about the purpose of vocational visits. Otherwise, "they often remain casual, ill-arranged ventures, vaguely prescribed" (p. 388). More recently, Watts (1996) has commented on the importance of integrating experiences of work, and visits are seen as having five stages: preparation, briefing, the activity, debriefing, and follow-up. Ongoing counselling support is critical, as many students need assistance and time to relate experiences "to their own personal picture" (McCarthy, 2001, p.10).

The system that has been described here is not particularly special but it worked, and it worked for large numbers of students. When faced with the obvious and less obvious qualities of job scenes the young people made relatively quick and certain decisions. There were associated gains such as increased motivation and application to schoolwork. Additionally, some students showed improved attendance and a reduction in behavioural issues.

The scheme was successful, it is suggested, because students were supported to actively engage with the options, and to process and personalize them. There were many instances of personal revelation when pupils discovered the expectations and satisfactions associated with surveying, journalism, or nursing; or when they appreciated for the first time the demands and opportunities of the hospitality industry or military service. Career choice ceased to be a nebulous exercise driven by teachers and parents. Instead, it became real life and meaningful.

Experience-based learning is a useful corrective to vocational counselling that focuses exclusively on students' aptitudes and abilities. Young people typically have experience deficits (Watts, 1996) and it is only when they expand the range of their experiences that they can engage in meaningful reflection. Further, it is not always recognised how consuming the career decision-making process can have to be. Richard Bolles, the popular American writer on job hunting and career change, describes these activities as fulltime jobs in themselves. Bolles also emphasises the need for direct involvements; "since a life-changing job-hunt is a kind of intuitional search, this means that hitting the streets and going face-to face is most often necessary. It requires you 'to get off your duff' " (2004, p. 2).

The counselling/work exploration programme at Tawa College had other gains. Over time, it became apparent that the visits were a mechanism for school and community relations and there were substantial mutual benefits to be had from them. For instance, some businesses took the opportunity to screen potential employees. They also welcomed the chance to interest young people in a particular sphere of activity, and they enjoyed being seen as socially responsible firms. Teachers had increasing access to the facilities and expertise of local industry and potentially this had considerable implications for instruction. A school might recognise the larger gains of work exploration from the outset and pursue them by inviting employers to school events, consulting with them on various matters, and publicly acknowledging the assistance that is provided.

The counselling and work exploration scheme was supported by a careers and transition programme that operated at every level of the school. The guiding philosophy was that pupils should be provided for at each transition point in their schooling. Hence, there were orientation events before students started college, there was guidance on subject choices in the first four years of secondary school, and there was coursework on careers topics (e.g., researching a job, decision making, job seeking skills) at year 9, 10, and 11. The senior school had the

counselling and work exploration option, a careers talks programme, and visits from, and to, polytechnics and universities.

In 1999 the Education Review Office (ERO) provided the following list of indicators that suggests whether a school is meeting student needs for careers information and guidance. There will be adequate resourcing (staffing, finance and space), effective planning, management and evaluation, and plentiful and well managed information sources (such as print, database, and videos). Careers information and guidance programmes will be provided for students at all levels and there will be individual interventions for young people at risk of unemployment.

Furthermore, ERO stated, schools that do careers well will have a continuously staffed careers and transition office. Staff will monitor school leaver destinations. The careers advisors will liaise with deans and other guidance people and they will also involve parents in careers information and guidance programmes whenever they can.

The last point, about parent involvement in careers work, probably warrants much greater attention by schools. Parents are presently a significant, but largely unseen, influence on students' vocational decision making and any association with the school may be limited to attendance at careers evenings. The Ministry of Education (2003a) suggests that caregivers can also be involved in career case-conferences and can support their children as they put their plans into action. As well, parents are a resource for schools as they can provide work exploration placements and they can act as speakers, mentors, and assist in other practical ways.

Transition initiatives can, and should, increase the permeability of the school. Work exploration takes students into the community and involving parents in careers activities is a means of bringing other adults into schools. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the modern school as isolated and insular, and as a potent alienating force. Establishing connections amongst the salient influences on adolescent development (school, family, peer group, neighbourhood) has implications for an array of student outcomes, such as academic achievement and social behaviour, and this includes facilitating easier career transitions.

Careers and transition demand a substantial commitment, which the Ministry of Education defines as "a whole-school approach to addressing the individual needs of diverse learners" (2003a, p. 5). When this involvement is not available, unnecessary and unhelpful situations can arise such as

subject teachers objecting to unhappy and completely unmotivated students missing an hour or two of class to visit a worksite. Amongst other matters, a school-wide commitment to careers is shown in the appointment and support of counsellors. Careers staffs need to be highly approachable people who can readily assimilate very large quantities of information, and who can effectively straddle the classroom, the school community, and the world of work. Regular access to professional development is critical to their work.

It is not always appreciated that careers and transition are national priorities. The National Administration Guidelines require schools to provide career education and guidance to all students in year 7 and beyond and, in particular, to give assistance to young people likely to experience difficulty transitioning to work, education, or training (Ministry of Education, 1999). As well, *Education Priorities for New Zealand* states that young people should be provided with "high quality support to access appropriate pathways in the transition from school to work and further education" (Ministry of Education, 2003b, p. 13).

The implementation of comprehensive careers and transition programmes represent an attitude or orientation, as much as anything. There is a fundamental and practical acknowledgement that students have complex needs, that they face significant personal challenges as they pass through the school, and that these realities require carefully conceptualised responses involving time, effort and money. One consequence of careers being poorly done is pupils making premature vocational choices. Another outcome is school leavers without purpose and who move in and out of casual employment, unemployment, and fill in training courses over a number of years.

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