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Career-Related Issues in Secondary Schools: A Literature Review
Jennifer E. McGhee

The career counselor’s role over the past 100 years or so has evolved from being a placement tool in the industrial revolution to that of providing a more holistic approach to meeting both the career and personal concerns of individuals. More and more counselors are beginning to focus on the person as a whole, including values, interests, abilities, skills, and work-life experiences, as they counsel on career-related issues (Zunker, 2006). As a focus on human development and the whole person enters the counseling field, school counselors are faced with developing comprehensive school guidance systems that meet the needs of students throughout elementary and high school. These programs focus on the importance of career development throughout the lifespan rather than during only one period.

Due to this increased importance on career development, a psycho-educational group aimed at addressing the needs and concerns of high school students is a much-needed intervention in the development of career concepts in students. Students are faced with making key career decisions in high school before many are equipped with the knowledge and maturity to make those decisions effectively. A group targeting secondary school students, beginning in 9th grade and continuing until high school graduation will aid in the development of self-awareness, interests, skills, and knowledge about career choices. Equipped with this knowledge, high school students should be able to make informed career decisions throughout their lifetime, rather than being pressured to make these decisions before they are ready.

As career-related counseling moves from a more placement-oriented to a more holistic approach, a growing body of literature has emerged. Many researchers, such as Gullickson (1995), have begun to view career counseling as a process rather than a stage. As a part of this process, more career-related interventions and activities are beginning to take place at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. With a rise in career development in the schools, issues surrounding multiculturalism, specific interventions, and ethical considerations are receiving more attention.

Gibson (2005) states that the emphasis on career education is very timely given research indicating that children relate to adult workers very early on in their lives. Gibson further states that “examining family dynamics, roles, and values with students in elementary, middle, and high school settings can be beneficial in helping students master the competencies in the comprehensive developmental guidance programs in order to reach their goals” (p. 353). Career development awareness at all grade levels can help integrate career concepts throughout the lifespan and increase possibilities of satisfying career choices (Hiebert, 1993).

Many secondary school students make choices and decisions that concern their careers and thus their lives and their families, yet they are not fully aware of the implications of the decisions they make (Gullickson, 1995). Much of the current literature points to the critical nature of skills and decisions made during the junior and senior high levels. However, students are being required to make critical decisions in high school about what they want to do in 5, 10, or even 20 years (Gullickson, 1995). At this point, most children are not educated enough or mature enough to make adequate career decisions. Although deciding early may satisfy the needs of some students, an early decision generally means that a student has closed off options that might have been more satisfying and fulfilling (Michelozzi, 2000).

Due to the lack of knowledge base and the increasing popularity of career counseling in secondary schools, more programs are being created and offered that address the holistic nature of career development. Many factors – values, interests, personal strengths and abilities, educational and
career-related goals, college information, and current labor market information – are vital to the career decision making of secondary school students, yet very few of them have adequate knowledge and skills in these areas (Gullekson, 1995). With the increased demands for instructional time increased at all levels, there is often little focus and emphasis placed on any form of counseling in individual or small group settings (Gibson, 2005). In a survey of incoming 10th graders, 65% believed that they would be going on to some college or university. However, only 20-25% of these same students actually did (Gullekson 1995). Thus, it has become the counselor’s role to emphasize career and self-knowledge in order to foster better career decisions and self-awareness, all the while staying abreast of current labor market trends and testing mechanisms, and then integrating all of these aspects (Springer & Pevoto, 2003).

One of the primary reasons that a focus on career is not a fundamental goal of counselors in high schools becomes obvious when one stops and looks at the ratio of counselors to students in typical high schools. The average ratio is about 1 counselor for every 500 students. Counselors are also given such broad job descriptions and duties that not only are they unable to focus on career-related development but also are unable to focus fully on any one aspect of their jobs (Gullekson, 1995).

Yet another reason for the poor career education programs is the lack of knowledge and responsibility of high school students about their own career planning process. It is typical for students to delay this process until their senior year and at this point it is treated more as an event rather than a process of informed decisions. “Career planning is not an event, and most students will probably not make just one major career decision” (Springer & Pevoto, 2003, p. 48). The increasing probability that one will make multiple career decisions in one’s lifetime has led to the recognition of the need for lifelong career development services (Kellet & Conger, 1995).

From a theoretical standpoint, Super (as cited in Gullekson, 1995) believes that almost all high school students are either entering or are firmly planted in the exploration stage and will remain here for a number of years after graduation. If one is viewing career development as a lifespan process rather than an event, it would be unreasonable to ask that high school students make such critical decisions regarding career choice. Instead, they ought to be taught, informed, and made aware of skills and decision making processes that they will need later in life. For Super, career guidance in high schools is about understanding how adolescents can develop their readiness to cope with career development tasks that will be presented to them in the future. This point was reinforced by Super, Savickas, and Super (as cited in Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002) who state that adolescent career development can be guided by maturing in abilities, interests, and coping resources.

As career counseling becomes increasingly complex, not only in high school settings but throughout the counseling field, more and more instruments for measuring are being developed. Assessment tools have been extremely helpful for students as well as for counselors in determining interests, values, abilities, skills, beliefs, etc. Though career counseling assessments are widely used and undeniably valuable, there are downsfalls to standardized testing as well. Watson, Duarte, & Glavin (2005) argue that constructs measured by career tests are not endogenous to all human beings and are thus, “not universal and should not be generalized across all culture groups” (p. 54). Rossier (as cited in Watson, Duarte, & Glavin, 2005) found that when tests are based on theories that are sensitive to cultural contexts, they become more stable across cultures. Many forms of measurement have been found to be consistent across cultures and these tests are the ones that are primarily being used in high school settings. In another study by Sverko & Baborovic (as cited in Watson, Duarte, & Glavin, 2005), tests based on Holland’s personality typology were found to be cross-culturally valid when used with students graduating from high school. Glavin (2004) supports that Holland’s typology is generally context free and further offers that psychological tests can be more generalized to other cultures than.
can psychosocial tests that are based on more
dynamic processes. One example of a characteristic
that varies between cultures is career maturity,
defined as “an individual’s readiness to make career
or educational decisions” (Watson, Duarte, &
Glavin, 2005, p. 54). This trait emphasizes
independent thought, planning, and exploration that
are prevalent in individualistic cultures where as
collectivist societies place more value on group
goals, group rewards, and interdependence (Watson,
Duarte & Glavin). The main issue surrounding the
use of career assessments in general as well as
specifically in secondary schools is the focus on the
cultural validity of each measure. Career
assessments should be used in conjunction with
career guidance and counseling to assess the
individuals’ cultural and contextual experiences,
behaviors, values, and beliefs. Glavin (2004) further
states that any career assessment should be a tool
for further exploration, not just an end in itself.

Assessment instruments are not the only place
in which multicultural issues have arisen. It has
been a longstanding argument that counseling as a
whole, including career counseling, needs to move
toward the integration of multiculturalism. For
many minority group members, family and
community may be the most important frames of
reference and thus need to be the focus of career
counseling (Bowman, as cited in Betz, 1993). When
considering this influence, it may also be beneficial
to consider group rather than individual
interventions. It is also important when working
with ethnic minorities to consider the importance of
historical, developmental, and age related
influences as these vary across cultures (Betz). For
example, Yang (1991) discussed the dilemmas
facing a Chinese American woman caught between
the Chinese emphasis on traditional female roles
and the common values for women in the United
States.

It has also become increasingly emphasized that
career counselors take special measures to educate
themselves about other cultures. Developing this
multicultural perspective can be a life-long
developmental task (Betz, 1993). Failure to do so
can sometimes be viewed as reinventing the wheel.

For example, African American women have been
traditionally independent and self-sufficient as well
as nurturing and emotionally expressive, thus
displaying traits of both traditionally male and
traditionally female roles, a quality that has become
popular in recent literature (Swanson, as cited in
Betz).

Secondary schools are a prime example of the
most ethnically diverse population that one will
encounter. For years, “black adolescents have been
urged to adopt Eurocentric values for education and
work” (Betz, 1993, p. 54). Betz continues by saying
that value measures and assessments must be
reconceptualized to incorporate the values of
different cultures and ethnicities. As populations
change from homogeneous groups to more diverse
cultures, career counselors must become more
culturally aware. Increasing recognition of cultural
influences on career development has led to an
increased need for research about the validity of
career development practice (Arthur & McMahon,
2005).

Career counselors also need to examine how
culture is represented in current theories and models
of career counseling (Arthur & McMahon, 2005).
For example, the Multicultural Career Counseling
Model for Ethnic Women has been created to
address the impact of cultural and familial
influences on the career choices of ethnic
populations. This model provides steps and stages
for comparing techniques designed to identify
specific needs of a special group of clients and the
methods and materials used in the counseling
process (Zunker, 2006). Recent conceptualizations
of career theories and career counseling models
have placed more emphasis on environmental and
contextual factors, including gender, ethnicity,
socioeconomic status, and cultural variables (Arthur
& McMahon, 2005). Though there has been
progress in the incorporation of multicultural factors
into career development models and career theories,
there is still a need to further study and develop
these aspects of career counseling in order to
develop more culturally applicable career
interventions.
There are currently many forms of interventions for career counselors, including both group and individual activities. The first and most widely used are introductory interventions such as career days and career fairs (Wonacott, 2001). These are the most widely used because they are generally very open and attendance is generally not limited. Advising interventions, including things such as interest inventories, tests of abilities, individual conferences with students, and/or parents and students, career maps, computer assisted guidance programs, etc. are also commonly used interventions among high school students (Wonacott, 2001). There are also many curriculum based interventions including test preparation, career development courses, etc. Additionally work-based interventions including such things as internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, mentoring, etc. are commonly utilized within secondary school settings (Wonacott, 2001).

The previously mentioned interventions (introductory, advising, curriculum based, and work based) make up the career development intervention taxonomy. As a result of the increasing need for, focus on, and thus creation of interventions, secondary school counselors are faced with the daunting task of skimming through numerous interventions to find the ones that best meet the needs of their students. The creation of the taxonomy serves to standardize career guidance language for ease of professional dialogue, provide the career counselor with a framework to judge where his school is underdeveloped, and also make it possible to compare efficacy of certain types of interventions against others to find the most beneficial intervention for the chosen population (Dykeman, Ingram, Wood, Charles, Chen, & Herr, 2001).

Yet another issue surrounding career counseling is the area of ethical guidelines. As a part of this, school counselors have an ethical responsibility to "possess or have access to the necessary skills and resources for giving the kind of help that is needed" (NCDA Professional Standards Committee, 1993, p. 5). To keep up with the increasing complexities of career counseling in secondary schools, counselors need to possess competencies with both knowledge and skills as well as with ethical decision making abilities (Stewart, 1999). One of the major ethical considerations receiving more attention in recent years is the use of computerized testing and record keeping (Eberlein, 1990). Ethical considerations should also be made when conducting assessments and testing. The client should be given necessary information about the test, the purpose of the test, and the interpretation, meaning, and use of the test results (Stewart). In addition to testing, school counselors face the ethical consideration of working with children. When minors are involved, parents or guardians are generally involved as well. There are certain guidelines that apply to situations with children that do not apply in other situations, and it is the counselors’ ethical responsibility to abide by these standards.

The literature on career counseling is growing every day. As the need for career counseling becomes increasingly popular, secondary school counselors will need to adopt new interventions for dealing with career-related issues and developmental issues of their students. Career counseling can no longer be looked at as a field in itself; it is becoming increasingly integrated into the overall field of counseling and is no longer approached as only one aspect in the development of a person.

References


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