

Sharing career development within the school community

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Janice Simpson from Career Kaleidoscope, a career development tool for 12 – 18 year olds, their parents and teachers, periodically conducts research using focus groups, surveys and questionnaires.

"I'd love to know a better way to get the parents helping me out when I need them." a busy careers teacher said to me a couple of years ago. "Why is that?" I enquired. "Well, we all know that parents, especially mums, have a lot of say about what their kids do, so if I could get them saying and doing the right things, my life would be a lot easier."

The same applies to other teachers too. One of the bugbears of my life when I was teaching was other teachers who thought the world was the same now as it had been when they left school and advised students accordingly. This was really evident in senior subject selection as well as the off-the-cuff comments about enrolling in university and applying for jobs.

Conversely at least three other career teachers with whom I spoke at the same time were adamant they did not want parents involved in what they do. This got me thinking about how to harness the good will and maximise the benefit that parents and other teachers can bring to the job of careers without compromising the current facts in any way.

I noted some research questions I wanted to explore about these issues. Are parents key influencers? If they are, how can schools use that power in a positive way for the benefit of everyone? Do non-careers teachers think that they, along with anyone else, dispense careers wisdom? If so, how much do they know about 'the scene' today, and if that isn't a lot, how can their knowledge and skills be increased, again to benefit everyone?

In 2002 - 03 I researched the importance of parent involvement in young people's career development. I asked 48 young adults and 19 parents to reflect on key career influences and received 83 responses from Victorian careers teachers to an in-depth questionnaire about their roles, responsibilities and workloads.

Parents provide the genetic, social and environmental codes for their children so it is to be expected that parents are key influencers for their children when it comes to career development. Spike Milligan knew it when he said, "My Father had a profound influence on me." He went onto say, "He was a lunatic." and for those of us who have laughed at the Goons and Spike for many years, we can only be thankful for that! The research findings of Super, Rogers, Erikson, Zunker and others support this. As Zunker¹ writes "...vocational self-concept develops through physical and mental growth, observations of work, identification with working adults, general environment, and general experiences. As experiences become broader in relation to awareness of the world of work, the more sophisticated vocational self-concept is formed" (Zunker 2001). The family is the place where young people develop their self-concepts and the careers teacher is usually the first formal connection a young person makes in the life-long career development process.

In the 2002 -03 interviews I conducted with 48 people aged 21 – 33, the predominant career influences were personal interests and immediate family. Forty-five young adults cited interests and/or passion and 23 cited their mum or dad as their main influences Only three persons mentioned a school-related experience, that of work experience, as having a major influence on their career decision-making. No one in the sample mentioned careers teachers

or classes as contributing to their career development. Parents also cited passion, mentioned by 31%, as well as themselves as a key influence, mentioned by 23%.

When we look at responses to the 2003 careers teachers' survey, 6% made comments about parents relating to the least satisfying aspects of the job. Three of these were "Dealing with parents who think I have all the answers."; "Conflict with parents."; and "Dealing with narrow minded parents who think you can choose a perfect course for their offspring." Other comments teachers made included "Dealing with involuntary or disinterested participants." ; "Reliance on others to do their part of the job."; "Other teachers who think they are good career advisors and tell students incorrect information." and "Having to justify the existence of Careers." all of which point to finding new and better ways of doing things. These comments highlight the difficulties encountered when parents and other teachers are influential but (presumably) not informed. Only one teacher made a positive comment about parents: "Their feedback is good."

Only 32% of young adults reported that their experience with school-based careers was helpful. The parent group reported 54% satisfaction rate. When asked to note key aspects that were helpful, young adults cited five aspects, two of which related to university entrance, whereas parents were more consistent in their response, 7 citing assistance in choosing a university course as the most helpful aspect provided by schools.

How can schools use the positive and necessary involvement of parents to foster career development and assist young people explore beyond their immediate environments? The findings indicate that 'careers' in school is not a significant player in career planning when young people reflect on their experiences at school. Parents and passion are pulling their weight but the effects and outcomes of structured funded school-based career education are failing. Explicitly engaging parents and/or other significant adults will achieve better outcomes for young people, but also for the career teacher who presently has to spend time explaining underpinning elements of career development and correcting misinformation provided by parents and other teachers.

Key pedagogical issues exist for careers teachers. The very title connotes pedagogy, but sadly, many teachers who do the careers job, have very little curriculum input. This occurs for a variety of reasons, very often not because the careers teacher wants it like that. Some schools do not think that there are any worthwhile curriculum issues on the subject of careers and so do not include topics of relevance within the curriculum either as a separate class or as an adjunct to other key learning areas. Others seek to assure parents that a program of thorough testingⁱⁱ will be of most benefit. Indeed testing is beneficial if a young person already has sufficient knowledge, but if this is not the case, and it is unreasonable to expect that many young people in Year 10 say will have sufficient knowledge of course, job and employment opportunities, testing is of very limited value to the developing individual. Added to that is the fact that no amount of testing – abilities, aptitudes, personality and so on – is going to develop career management skills. A test in time is merely that, no less and no more. Just as the maths teacher does not expect students to learn maths via a single test, it is just as untenable for the careers teacher to expect students to learn how to manage their lifelong career development if the program mainly focuses is on testing.

Should a careers teacher focus on content or process? Should they tell or sell? As Mark McCrindle says, "Young people don't care how much you know until you care how much they know." What is clear is that a system must exist in every school for young people to manage their own careers information research. It is also essential that teachers provide the source of the information not the information itself. We need to develop self-reliant and skilled people. The information when it is retrieved must have currency, validity and be accessible to cater for all learning styles. This is the true job of the teacher. Print guides are useful for people who find reading a good way to learn and find things out; videos are good for visual learners; work experience is good for kinaesthetic learners and so on. The careers room that is filled with magazine holders brim full of handbooks and pamphlets only suits some. Videos and Internet programs can do a lot for students who prefer to absorb their knowledge in another way. As can all the other ways we find things out including talking, working and observing.

Technology is another big issue. Most homes now have Internet access as do most schools. In fact it is all around us. However, there still remains an issue regarding control of resources in many schools. Even though Internet tools and programs are readily available, many students do not access them as they are controlled through the school. This surely defeats the purpose of the world's best resource. Young people are technology savvy. They use technology for many things everyday. The wise teacher provides Internet access in the same way they provide other information sources - organised and everywhere, personal and discursive. As we all can see, communication is increasingly kinesthetic – young people use their fingers a lot these days when communicating!

Promise yourself you will work a bit smarter next year, not harder, and make some strategic changes to include, inform, involve and recognise the importance of parents and other teachers in assisting you achieve your outcomes.

A good first step is to position yourself with evidence about the importance of career education for the students and parents at your school. Ask students and parents what they want and need. Evaluate what you do now and measure how effectively student and parental expectations are met. Research what others do and what tools are available to assist. Plan what needs to occur and by when to achieve minimum expectations. Develop a budget. Talk to others in your school community and gain support for your plan. Write a proposal based on your evidence, your action plan and your budget requirements. You are now in a position to clearly articulate what it is you need and have at hand the means to achieve it in a collaborative way.

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i Zunker, V. (2001) *Career Counseling: Applied Concepts of Life Planning* Wadsworth Publishing

ii A commonly used testing tool is the Self Directed Search developed by John Holland who suggested "people can function and develop best and find job satisfaction in work environments that are compatible with their personalities". Holland based his theory of personality types on several assumptions. People tend to choose a career that is reflective of their of their personality. Because people tend to be attracted to certain jobs, the environment then reflects this personality. He classified these personality types and work environments into six types which he labeled realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. He suggests that the closer the match of personality to job, the greater the satisfaction. According to Zunker, such an approach may be limiting as "Holland's theory places emphasis on the accuracy of self-knowledge and career information necessary for career decision making." (Zunker 1994)

Another commonly used tool is the Myer-Briggs™ Personality test, based on Carl Jung's personality theories. This is commonly used in schools. There is considerable debate as to whether a test based on personality is useful at all until a person has reached the age of 25 or so when identity has firmed. Regardless of this, there are other concerns about reliability with the MBTI™. Several studies have shown that when retested, even after intervals as short as five weeks, as many as 50 percent of people will be classified into a different type. This raises questions as to its usefulness specifically when used as a career guidance tool. (Pittenger, David J. "Measuring the MBTI and Coming Up Short." *Journal of Career Planning & Placement*. Fall 1993).