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ABSTRACT

The importance of addressing the career- and life-planning needs of Canadian children and adolescents has emerged as a prominent theme in recent studies. Studies of adolescents demonstrate that they are proactive and future-oriented and want to gain information and skills to help prepare them for the transition to adulthood. The purpose of this study was to explore the needs of children and adolescents as identified by students, their parents, and school staff. One elementary-junior high school and one senior high school in Calgary, Alberta, were chosen for this study. The results revealed that students and parents perceived there to be the highest degree of need within the life-planning skills area. School staff, on the other hand, reported that the life-planning subscale was the least important area of need and scored self-management as the top priority need for the students they taught. Additionally, identified areas of need increased across the school levels, with primary students reporting the strongest and greatest number of need areas. The results suggest that comprehensive school programs should start at an early age and continue throughout a child's education. (Contains 13 references and 2 tables.) (GCP)

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Career- and Life-planning Needs of Children and Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of addressing the career- and life-planning needs of Canadian children and adolescents has emerged as a prominent theme in recent studies (Hiebert, Collins and Carins 1994; Hiebert, Kemeny and Kurchack 1998). Studies of adolescents demonstrate that they are proactive and future-oriented and want to gain information and skills to help prepare them for the transition to adulthood. Although career- and life-planning may not be as relevant to young children, as the Canadian Guidance and Counselling Foundation (1993) states, these skills are developed over a long period of time and have their beginnings in the primary years.

Gysbers (1998) suggests that the term *career* is not synonymous with *occupation,* but rather a holistic description of the total self-development individuals experience over their lifespans, including their physical, social, psychological, and occupational development. In North America, two of the primary educational initiatives designed to address the holistic needs of children and adolescents are Comprehensive School Health (CSH) and Comprehensive Guidance and Counselling (CGC) initiatives. The main focus of CSH initiatives is to provide students with school health services and instruction as well as to create healthy school environments (Kolbe 1986). CGC initiatives primarily address student needs within the career, personal/social, and educational domains (Gysbers 1997).

Although CSH and CGC initiatives emerge from different theoretical models and have somewhat different mandates, they share several philosophical underpinnings. First, both initiatives attempt to address the "whole-person" needs of children and adolescents including their physical, social, and psychological needs. Second, program development, implementation, and evaluation is regarded as a collaborative endeavour among students, parents, teachers, administrators, school support staff, and community members, who are all viewed as essential and valuable contributors. Third, both initiatives share a commitment to a "bottom-up" approach, which ensures that all stakeholders, particularly students, are provided with a voice in all aspects of programming. Fourth, both programs are developmental, in that students build on previously learned skills. Fifth, a comprehensive needs assessment is viewed as a vital first step in determining the needs of each unique school population and community. Thus, both programs are based on the

fundamental belief that schools need to be proactive in providing comprehensive and developmental programming for all students in order to better prepare youth to cope with the many challenges they will face throughout their lives (Allensworth 1994; Snyder and Daly 1993).

Canadian research on the "whole-person" needs of children and adolescents has only begun to emerge. While a few studies have been conducted at the junior high (Kemeny 1997) and senior high levels (Collins 1993, 1998), no studies have been conducted at the primary level (Grades 1 to 3). Moreover, no Canadian studies have directly compared how the needs of children and adolescents differ from Kindergarten to Grade 12. What the research has demonstrated is that adolescents frequently report receiving career information and support in developing career skills (e.g., résumé writing, job interview skills, communication skills) as a top priority (Collins 1998). Young people also report that the development of academic skills (e.g., organizational skills, concentration skills, time management) is an important area of need (Kemeny 1997). These skills also help prepare students for future challenges and transfer into the work world.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was to explore the needs of children and adolescents as identified by students, their parents, and school staff. One elementary-junior high school and one senior high school in Calgary, Alberta, were chosen for this study. The focus was on primary students (Grades 1–3), junior high students (Grades 7–9) and senior high students (Grades 10–12). The student sample consisted of a total of 699 students (48 primary, 242 junior high, 409 senior high), 384 parents (34 primary, 180 junior high, 170 senior high), and 44 school staff members (19 junior high, 25 senior high). Primary school staff data was not available. Both schools were developing comprehensive programs in their schools and planned to use the results of this research as the basis for their programming decisions.

A version of the "Student Needs Survey" was developed for each school level and each stakeholder group (parents, school staff, students) through a number of focus groups using the "Health Needs Survey" (Collins 1993, 1998) as a starting point. The questions in the survey were organized into seven subscales,

including self-esteem (feel good about abilities, appearance, degree of peer acceptance, willingness to stand up for themselves), self-management (time management, adherence to school expectations), crisis resolution (assistance in solving immediate high-risk problems), equality (acceptance of others), life-planning skills (future education, career, and adult responsibilities), relationship skills (communication and relationship-building skills), and clear and consistent expectations (regarding roles and expectations of teachers and parents). The survey instructed participants to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", indicating the extent to which that item represented a need for them. Students responded to questions in terms of their own personal needs, while parents and staff were asked to respond in terms of their child's or their students' needs. An overall mean was calculated for each subscale based on the responses to the individual items within each subscale. Subscale scores 3.5 or higher were considered very important areas of need, and scores 2.5 or higher were considered to be important areas of need.

RESULTS

Senior high school

The results revealed that students and parents perceived there to be the highest degree of need within the life-planning skills area (see table 1). School staff, on the other hand, reported that the life-planning subscale was the least important area of need and scored self-management as the top priority need for the students they taught. Student, parent, and school staff subscale scores all indicated that these groups believed that it was important for adolescents to have clear and consistent expectations and to develop self-management skills. Students and parents concurred that crisis resolution was not an important area of need, while school staff were more concerned about immediate problems that were putting some students at risk. Students' scores also indicated that they did not have unmet needs within the equality, self-esteem, and relationship skills areas. This differed from both adult groups, who reported that these were important areas of need.

The analysis of gender also revealed some interesting findings within the student group. Females' scores were higher than males' scores within all seven subscales. Both males and females

reported the highest needs within the life-planning skills and clear and consistent expectations subscales. A particularly poignant finding was the fact that self-esteem was the fourth priority need area for female students, compared to male students who scored this subscale below 2.5, indicating that this was not a priority need area. Both males and females reported that their needs within the equality, crisis resolution, and relationship skills subscales were currently being met, or were not important areas of need at this time.

Table 1 Group Comparison of Mean Subscale Scores

SENIOR HIGH SAMPLE

STUDENTS		PARENTS		SCHOOL STAFF	
Life-Planning Skills	2.79	Life-Planning Skills	3.11	Self-Management	3.31
Clear Expectations	2.62	Self-Esteem	2.78	Equality	2.92
Self-Management	2.53	Clear Expectations	2.74	Crisis Resolution	2.90
Equality	2.40	Self-Management	2.63	Clear Expectations	2.81
Self-Esteem	2.34	Equality	2.61	Self-Esteem	2.71
Crisis Resolution	2.34	Relationship Skills	2.53	Relationship Skills	2.66
Relationship Skills	2.22	Crisis Resolution	2.44	Life Planning Skills	2.64

JUNIOR HIGH SAMPLE

STUDENTS		PARENTS		SCHOOL STAFF	
Life-Planning Skills	2.89	Life-Planning Skills	3.08	Self-Esteem	3.05
Clear Expectations	2.83	Self-Esteem	2.90	Crisis Resolution	3.02
Self-Esteem	2.59	Equality	2.76	Equality	2.92
Equality	2.56	Clear Expectations	2.71	Relationship Skills	2.85
Crisis Resolution	2.47	Crisis Resolution	2.63	Self-Management	2.81
Relationship Skills	2.44	Relationship Skills	2.60	Life-Planning Skills	2.76
Self-Management	2.39	Self-Management	2.36	Clear Expectations	2.68

PRIMARY SAMPLE

STUDENTS		PARENTS	
Self-Esteem	3.16	Equality	3.13
Crisis Resolution	3.14	Self-Esteem	2.93
Life Planning Skills	3.06	Crisis Resolution	2.93
Equality	2.89	Relationships Skills	2.49
Clear Expectations	2.52	Life Planning Skills	2.22
Relationships Skills	2.51	Clear Expectations	2.17
Self-Management	2.25	Self-Management	1.66

Note: Subscales with scores above 2.5 are considered to be important areas of need.

Junior high school

Similar to the senior high results, students and parents scored the life-planning skills subscale as the highest priority, while school staff scored this area as a less important concern (see table 1). The clear and consistent expectations subscale was also considered a higher priority by students and parents than by school staff. On the other hand, school staff placed more emphasis on crisis resolution and self-management than the other two groups. However, all three groups had similar rankings for self-esteem and equality. It is also interesting to note that while school staff scored all subscales above 2.5 and parents only scored one area below 2.5 (self-management), students scored three areas (crisis resolution, relationship skills, and self-management) as unimportant.

In the junior high sample, both males and females scored life-planning skills as the first priority, clear and consistent expectations as second, and self-esteem as third. Females scored five subscales above 2.5, while males scored four subscales as important at this time. Females felt equality and crisis resolution were important need areas, while males reported self-management was important. Both males and females scored relationships as sixth and below 2.5.

Primary results

As with both the junior and senior high populations, noteworthy differences emerged between the perceptions of student needs as identified by adults and by students themselves. The subscale scores indicate that primary students perceived student needs in a greater number of areas than did parents (see table 1). In total, five of the seven subscales were identified as important areas by students, as opposed to the three areas identified by parents. Students, but not parents, identified life-planning skills and clear and consistent expectations as areas of need. While both parents and students reported equality, self-esteem, and crisis resolution as top priority areas, notable differences occurred in the priority given to these subscales. The number one priority for students, self-esteem, was ranked second by parents, and the top item for parents, equality, was ranked fourth by students.

Gender differences emerged across the primary grades. Males identified all seven subscales as being areas of need, whereas females scored only four subscales as priority needs. Only males scored relationship skills, clear and consistent expectations, and

self-management as areas of priority need. While life-planning skills was identified as a top priority need for males, it ranked third with females. Last, crisis resolution was scored first for females, but only third for males.

Summary

When the responses of students were examined across the school levels, several differences emerged (see table 2). Identified areas of need increased across the school levels, with primary students reporting the strongest (as indicated by scores above 3.0) and greatest number of need areas. Crisis resolution and relationship skills were priority needs for primary students, whereas junior high and senior high students both reported that these were not important need areas. Self-management was the third priority need for senior high students, compared to junior high and primary-aged students who both reported that this was not a priority need area. Within the top three rankings, only life-planning skills was identified as a need area across all three school levels.

Table 2 School Level Comparison of Mean Subscale Scores

SCHOOL LEVEL					
PRIMARY		JUNIOR HIGH		SENIOR HIGH	
Self Esteem	3.16	Life Planning Skills	2.89	Life Planning Skills	2.79
Crisis Resolution	3.14	Clear Expectations	2.83	Clear Expectations	2.62
Life Planning Skill	3.06	Self-Esteem	2.59	Self-Management	2.53
Equality	2.89	Equality	2.56	Equality	2.40
Clear Expectations	2.52	Crisis Resolution	2.47	Self-Esteem	2.34
Relationships Skills	2.51	Relationship Skills	2.44	Crisis Resolution	2.34
Self-Management	2.25	Self-Management	2.39	Relationship Skills	2.22

Note: Subscales above the line are considered to be important areas of need.

At the primary, junior high, and senior high levels, students and adults differed in their perceptions of students' needs in several areas. At the junior high and senior levels, student scores were much lower than either adult group. The reverse was true at the primary level, where student scores were generally higher than parent scores. With regard to life-planning skills, students across school levels consistently reported this was a priority need. Parents and school staff of junior and senior high school

students perceived this to be the number one priority need, whereas parents of primary students did not perceive this to be a priority need.

There were also some interesting patterns noted throughout the school levels concerning gender. Males at the primary level identified more areas as important than females identified, while the opposite was true for junior and senior high students. The number of areas identified as important by males lessened at each developmental level, while conversely, females identified approximately the same number of areas as important throughout the school levels. Life planning was a top priority for both genders in junior and senior high school, while it was scored relatively lower by females in the primary sample. The relative ranking of the equality, relationship skills, and clear and consistent expectations subscales were consistent for females and males across all three levels of schools.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore the career and life-planning needs of students from Grade 1 through high school, as identified by students, their parents, and school staff. Life-planning skills was scored as the top priority need area by both junior and senior high populations and was scored as the third-highest priority area by primary students. The fact that students reported numerous needs concerning career information, post-secondary training, and job-related skills demonstrated their desire to be better prepared for the transition to work or further educational opportunities. This is consistent with previous research in this area, which has found adolescents to be self-motivated, proactive, and solution-focused when it comes to planning for their futures (Collins and Hiebert 1995; Hiebert, Collins, and Cairns 1994; Kemeny 1997; Violato and Holden 1988).

While students within this study tended to be skill-orientated and proactive in the type of needs they reported, adults perceived students to have more remedial, crisis-oriented, and problem-focused needs. These results speak to the importance of engaging all stakeholders, particularly students themselves, in needs assessments in order to fully understand the types of challenges youth face. Including students in needs assessments and program development ensures that the scope of comprehensive school programming is based on the realities of the service

recipients, rather than solely on inferences of what students need. Furthermore, when student input is gathered, students are more likely to experience a sense of ownership, which is critical for program success. However, adult perceptions are also important, as they reflect a diverse array of knowledge, experience, and expertise. When input is solicited from all stakeholders, the information collected can create a rich picture of the needs of children and adolescents.

As noted above, unless students perceive that their voices have been heard and that their felt needs are being addressed, they are unlikely to be motivated to engage in adult-driven programs and initiatives. The results of this study suggest that students are not a homogenous group. Rather, gender differences that emerged across all three grade levels stress the importance of examining the needs of subgroups of students. By allowing students to have a voice, and by examining concerns raised to determine if subgroups of students express unique subsets of needs, program developers are well on their way to establishing comprehensive and responsive programs.

In addition to differences found between stakeholders and within subgroups, noteworthy differences emerged when student responses were examined across grade levels. The number of student-reported priority needs decreased as grade level increased, with the primary-aged students identifying the greatest number of need areas. Further developmental differences were also evident in the types of needs identified across the grade levels. These developmental differences highlight the dynamic nature of student needs due to maturation (DeGraw 1994; Gysbers and Moore 1981).

At the primary level, students identified more concrete career and life-planning needs (e.g., exposure to their communities and community members), whereas at the junior and senior high level students identified the need for more specific career information and skill development (e.g., résumé writing, developing interview skills). These developmental trends suggest that comprehensive school programs should start at an early age and continue throughout a child's education. Career- and life planning can initially be approached as career education and career exploration, followed by career planning in later school years. By listening to the voices of all stakeholders, including youth, parents, and school staff, program developers are better able to meet the diverse needs of youth.

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