SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

The changing nature of work is placing increased pressures on young people to manage their own career paths in flexible and creative ways. School-to-work transition programs are typically designed to assist with this process by providing adolescents with skills and knowledge to prepare them to enter the world of work. However, the school-to-work movement has been criticised for its lack of a theoretical basis to guide these efforts to increase the vocational opportunities of adolescents. After critically reviewing the recent theoretical literature concerning the school-to-work process, this article examines four influential career theories (social cognitive career theory, person-environment fit theory, developmental theory and social learning theory). It then highlights the potential of each to inform the school-to-work process, and then examines practical intervention strategies that are consistent with the theories presented and likely to assist in effective school-to-work transition.
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The nature of work has changed during the past twenty years and is likely to continue to do so well into the twenty-first century (Watts, 1996). Work tasks are simultaneously becoming more service oriented and more technology oriented (Bridges, 1994). Employers are decreasing their level of long-term commitment to their workers and increasingly using external contractors, temporary and part-time staff as they are needed (Handy, 1994). In the future, working individuals will need to be responsible for their own career, and be able to develop flexibility and creativity in relation to their career path (Watts, 1997). Therefore, as the twenty-first century begins, innovative approaches to preparing young people for their adult working lives are much more urgent than ever (Takanishi & Hamburg, 1997).

Interest in the school-to-work transition has fluctuated over recent years mainly because of political and economic considerations. The recently revived interest in school-to-work transition has been sparked by a succession of reports relating to the decline in educational achievements and the changing demands in the labour market. So far, the school-to-work movement has been based mainly on economic rather than psychological principles. Economic theories have tended to promote general employability skills and industry specific skills in order to make adolescents more attractive to potential employers, while psychological theories have tended to be more concerned with personal traits or characteristics that might translate into human capital. However, both of these approaches have a common purpose, which is to create a system in which the transition allows adolescents to identify and achieve productive and rewarding roles in the workplace. Worthington and Juntunen (1997) have encouraged counsellors to develop an integrative theory of the school-to-work transition, while Hansen
(1999) have urged that schools involve counsellors, teachers, parents, communities and students in their career counselling approach. Lent, Hackett and Brown (1996) also argued for a common conceptual framework to be developed, and argued for co-operation among theorists, researchers and practitioners across all disciplinary boundaries.

Watts (1997), among others, has proposed that career guidance become an integral part of the education system, as it is critical, “in helping students to clarify and articulate their aims and aspirations; in ensuring that their decisions are informed in relation to the needs of the labour market; and in empowering individuals in their negotiations with employers and other purchasers of their services” (p. 39). Students need the opportunity to develop self-awareness, skills and knowledge that will enable them to make and implement career decisions. This requires increases in both the quantity and quality of career guidance delivered. It also requires stronger links with the world of work by viewing employers as partners in learning. It is the responsibility of the school to foster adolescent’s motivation and confidence, and to develop their skills for learning how to learn. An integrated approach to employment, education and training appears to be the key to fostering the development of a skilled and flexible workforce that will be needed to meet the demands created by the changing social, economic and industrial environment (Dawkins, 1988). In this context, this review will examine the recent literature in relation to the theoretical positions proposed to account for the school-to-work process, and then make recommendations for school-based interventions to facilitate school-to-work transition. First, however, it is necessary to consider the developmental aspects of adolescence which emphasise the limited experiences of adolescents and types of learning required during the school-to-work transition period.
Adolescence has been dominated by two major theories: the classical, turmoil theory and the modern-day, normality theory (Collins, 1991). It is now widely acknowledged that many adolescents do not experience extreme turmoil and are able to cope successfully with the changes that occur throughout adolescence without extreme or even observable signs of stress (Buchanan, Eccles & Becker, 1992). Adolescence, however, can be marked by dramatic physiological and psychological changes. It is a time when integration of the personality begins to manifest itself in the form of ego identity, and adolescents search for sameness and continuity (Erikson, 1963). Society’s expectation for 16-17 year olds is schooling, sometimes combined with part-time employment. For the older 18-19 years olds, the expectation is full-time employment, post-secondary school education or education and employment combined (Wright, 1991). Adolescence is also a time of exploration and uncertainty, so it is not surprising that most teenagers do not know how they want to spend their adult working lives (Pauly, Kopp & Haimson, 1995). Society encourages adolescents to explore a variety of occupational fields and to match their abilities and preferences with specific occupational areas. Work-related activities provide adolescents with work experience as well as facilitate the acquisition of more realistic work preferences (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997), and many make changes to their career plans once they acquire some knowledge about their original career preference (Pauly et al.).

Adolescents need dependable guidance and help to gain career information and learn interpersonal, decision-making and problem-solving skills. Training interventions for life skills, such as for cognitive development and learning, social competence, decision-making, social
support and school to community linkage, should encompass the full school experience. This is based on findings to date that show maximum efficiency when programs are developmentally appropriate and comprehensive, and have continuity over a number of years (O’Neil, 1997; Takanishi & Hamburg, 1997). Although school-to-work transition is but a “road stop on the career development highway” (p. 127), it is one in which career development services can either promote or act as an impediment to the rest of the journey (Rusch & Chadsey, 1998). In this context, school-to-work policies are generally designed to provide a framework to increase the opportunities of adolescents by combining classroom experiences with work experiences to prepare them for the world of work (Noe, 1999).

THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION MOVEMENT

A number of national school-to-work transition policies have been enacted in various countries. One recent example is the US School to Work Opportunities Act (STWOA) of 1994 that assists non-college bound youths by providing federal backing for a variety of workforce readiness programs (Lewis, Stone, Shipley & Madzar, 1998). The act has a number of purposes, including helping youths to identify and navigate pathways to work, and assisting parents, employers and labour organisations to form partnerships dedicated to linking schools to the world of work. At this level, the school-to-work movement represents a large-scale effort to improve the way that adolescents prepare to enter the workforce. Supplementary goals include reducing a variety of social problems such as drop-out rates, juvenile delinquency, and teenage parenthood. Considering these national programs could directly affect the vocational outcomes
of 75% of the youth in the United States (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997) and 65% of the youth in Australia (Kemp, 1997), the potential impact is enormous.

At the local level, a range of interventions, such as job skills training and youth apprenticeships programs, have been found to be useful, although school systems have been slow to implement them (Lent et al., 1996). Further, Bloch (1996) reported that school administrators have limited knowledge of national career development or workforce preparation policies and a low level of commitment to related career development outcomes. Unfortunately, the students themselves do not embrace school-to-work programs, and teachers are more active in workforce preparation activities than school counsellors due to administrative tasks and crises. School-to-work initiatives offer a unique challenge for career development personnel to design programs that will facilitate long-term development and adjustment. Lent (1996) argued that for school-to-work initiatives to succeed, counsellors will need to find a sustained voice within the school reform movement in order to educate administrators, teachers, parents and politicians of the need to implement comprehensive school guidance programs that systematically attend to workforce preparation.

According to Worthington and Juntunen (1997), the school-to-work movement currently lacks an explicit theoretical foundation upon which to base its efforts to increase the vocational opportunities of adolescents. It is with this in mind that a review of the four main career theories and how they inform school-to-work interventions is presented. These theories include social cognitive career theory, person-environment fit theory, developmental theory and social learning theory. Each theory offers a vantage point from which to understand and facilitate the school-to-work transition. Each theory also has the potential to provide a theoretical foundation for the development of school-to-work interventions and to assist programming efforts.
SOCIAL COGNITIVE CAREER THEORY

Social cognitive career theory, based on Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory, is one of the most influential new approaches in career development. Although social cognitive career theory was not specifically developed to explain the school-to-work transition process, it offers a useful perspective from which to understand and support this transition. Social cognitive career theory views work transition as a gradual process, which could begin in the elementary and middle school years with developmentally appropriate interventions that should continue throughout the school years and beyond a student’s entry into the workplace, rather than be concentrated just at the end of high school. The thrust is on lifelong career development, not just on one that ends with high school graduation and entry into university or the workplace (Lent, Hackett & Brown, 1999).

The three key variables underlying social cognitive career theory are self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. Self-efficacy refers to expectations about one’s performance capabilities, the most powerful source of which is personal mastery experience. When a task is successfully performed it increases the probability of successful future performances, thereby enhancing self-efficacy. Observing others’ behaviour, as well as observing one’s own reactions to different performance situations, verbal feedback, physiological and emotional reactions such as anxiety or positive mood states, also influence self-efficacy. SCCT advocates that students with adequate skills and low self-efficacy beliefs will benefit from efficacy enhancing interventions and further skill development activities (Lent et al., 1999).

Outcome expectations refer to beliefs about the consequences of performance effort. If adolescents perceive that they are competent at an activity (e.g., mathematics), and they enjoy
the outcomes from that activity (e.g., good grades, satisfaction or parental approval), then an ongoing interest in this activity will be sustained. This suggests that self-efficacy and outcome expectations are central to the development of adolescents’ career interests and their perceived range of available options (Lent, 1996).

The third key variable is goals. Goals appear important in achieving longer-term outcomes such as finishing high school or getting a particular job. By selecting certain goals, adolescents are guiding their own educational and vocational behaviours. Social cognitive theory places great emphasis on personal goals by viewing them as the key to motivating behaviour. However, goals will only be followed through if they are clear and specific and held with strong commitment. They also need to be stated publicly, set close to the time when they are intended to be implemented and have sub-goals. The process of vocational interests being translated into goals, and goals into actions, will be influenced by the student’s perception of support by significant others and barriers such as lack of funds (Brown & Lent, 1996).

Interventions based on social cognitive career theory would specifically address the barriers and supports that adolescents believe affect the transition into the workplace. For instance, barrier-coping strategies present ways to identify and manage the barriers as they occur. Social cognitive career theory recommends that adolescents should be encouraged to recognise opportunities and resources to find jobs, and to cultivate support systems such as family, neighbours and peer networks in order to support their vocational goals.

Students with low self-efficacy and a lack of skills can benefit from skill-building efforts or from consideration of an alternative occupational pursuit more in line with their current capabilities. Other efficacy-enhancing interventions include promoting personal mastery experiences that include challenging school or job related tasks; reviewing previous successful
performances; and modifying faulty self-efficacy perceptions by interpreting both past and present successes and promoting perceived competence rather than discounting perceived competence (Lent et al., 1999). Students may need to learn to attribute accomplishments to internal stable causes (e.g., ability), rather than to internal unstable causes (e.g., effort) or to external causes such as luck or task ease (Brown & Lent, 1996).

In summary, intervention strategies flowing from social cognitive career theory include:

- barrier-coping strategies
- strategies to recognise opportunities and resources
- strategies to cultivate support systems
- promotion of skill building
- assistance to cultivate a range of alternative occupations
- promotion of personal mastery experiences
- review of previous successful performances
- assistance in identifying and modifying faulty beliefs

PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT THEORY

Person-environment fit is based on two complementary theories, Holland’s (1997) model of vocational personality types, which emphasises occupational choice, and the Dawis and Lofquist (1984) theory of work adjustment, which emphasises vocational adjustment. Person-environment fit theory can be applied to the school-to-work process by considering the person and the environment equally and by matching the adolescent with employment (Lent & Worthington, 1999).
There are three main assumptions underlying person-environment fit theory. The first is that individuals seek out environments that are congruent with their personality. Holland (1992) proposed six personality types and six environment types, and predicted that people whose personality was matched with their occupation would enjoy more satisfaction and more success than those not so matched. The theory of work adjustment indicates that individuals seek to achieve harmony between themselves and the environment by achieving both satisfaction in the job and with their individual values.

The second assumption is that the degree of individual/environment fit is associated with important outcomes, with either a good or poor fit between person and environment. Good outcomes stimulate satisfaction, achievement, and encourage stability of behaviour, while poor outcomes motivate the person to make an adjustment or leave the environment due to incongruence. The third assumption is that person-environment fit is a reciprocal process whereby the person shapes the environment and the environment shapes the person. Holland’s theory states that jobs change people and people change jobs, whereas the theory of work adjustment implies that the individual and the environment interact in order to achieve a harmonious relationship (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

Traditionally, the school-to-work movement has focused on the environment while overlooking the person. To overcome this problem schools need to give adequate attention to increasing the adolescent’s self-knowledge. This may be even more critical for work-bound rather than university-bound youth. Students need to develop a sense of their own skills, interests, values and work-related personality characteristics in order to chose an occupation congruent with their personality. This can be achieved by working with a counsellor to increase
awareness of themselves and of the different opportunities that are available (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

Knowledge of the types of skills and abilities needed in the world of work is also a critical element of person-environment fit theory. Not only do adolescents need a greater knowledge of themselves but they also need knowledge of various work environments and their rewards. Interest inventories allow students to identify their interests and a corresponding occupation. Person-environment fit can also help extend knowledge beyond the transition of school-to-work, offering a more comprehensive perspective of the transition as a developmental process by predicting and understanding choice and adjustment of career patterns throughout the life span (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

The person-environment fit theory may be the easiest to translate into the goals and objectives of school-to-work programs. Students can identify abilities and needs through the use of interest inventories, and can be provided with work placement opportunities so that they can identify work environments in which they would be the most satisfied and where their abilities and needs provide the best match. Occupational knowledge and decision-making skills can be taught in a developmental context in order to help the student through the school-to-work transition event, as well as be relevant for future occupational decisions. Attention also needs to be directed to encouraging the student to continually evaluate decisions and change them if necessary (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

In summary, intervention strategies generated by the person-environment fit position include:

- development of self-knowledge by identifying abilities and values
- increase awareness of required work skills and abilities
increase awareness of training, educational and work opportunities available
teach decision-making skills and generalise to future occupational decisions
courage continual evaluation of decisions

CAREER DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Numerous studies over the past 60 years agree that the essence of school-to-work transition is developmental in nature. The years after a student leaves school are years of choice and change. According to Super (1957) these years are devoted to exploration which in turn leads to the eventual establishment of an adult career pattern. Career development theory offers a practical model for understanding how adolescents move from school to work, from career exploration to occupational establishment, and from adolescence to adulthood by emphasising vocational development tasks and coping behaviours. The major task according to this approach is increasing choice awareness by seeking information and then planning in order to make the choices (Savickas, 1999). This can be accomplished by encouraging students to explore and, if possible, participate in the widest possible range of activities (Vondracek & Skorikov, 1997).

Career development theory identifies developmentally appropriate tasks and interventions at different educational levels and focuses on self-knowledge, occupational information, decision-making, planning and problem solving through four intervention methods (Savickas, 1999). These four intervention methods are career orientation, teaching skills for planning and exploring career possibilities, coaching of career management techniques, and role rehearsal of job problems. Career orientation will encourage students’ career awareness as well as foster positive attitudes toward planning and exploring career developmental tasks. This is usually
achieved by discussion of the items on career development inventories such as the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1978) and the Adult Career Concerns Inventory (Super, Thompson, & Lindeman, 1988). Through such activities the student is able to become aware of the developmental tasks involved in career decision making and to develop attitudes that enable them to cope with these tasks.

Teaching students the competence and skill to plan and explore career choice and work adjustment can be achieved by using numerous career education curriculum guides. These will develop a student’s understanding of how school and work are different in regard to various issues such as advancement and work problems. Coaching in career management techniques will enable the student to successfully learn coping behaviours to deal with co-workers as well as give practical knowledge about adapting to the different cultures of a work places. Coaches can help clients to develop coping behaviours that deal with performance, interpersonal relations, work habits and attitudes, advancement, and career planning. Role rehearsal, including practice at problem-solving, will provide students with more informed and better responses that will enable them to increase adaptability and adjustment in their first full-time job (Savickas, 1999).

In summary, intervention strategies from the career development theory approach include:

. encouragement of career orientation to increase awareness
. fostering of positive attitudes toward planning and exploring career development tasks
. teaching planning skills
. teaching career exploration skills
. coaching career management techniques
. teaching problem-solving situations through role rehearsal
LEARNING THEORY OF CAREER COUNSELLING

The learning theory of career counselling is based on Bandura’s (1971) earlier work centred on social learning theory of behaviour, (in contrast to social cognitive career theory, which is based on Bandura’s later (1986) work). The learning theory of career counselling proposes that individuals are active, intelligent, problem-solving agents who interact with their surroundings to pursue their own purposes and needs. However, genetic endowments, environmental conditions, planned and unplanned events, and learning experiences and their consequences influence the particular career path each individual takes. Therefore, to understand individual behaviour, it is necessary to understand the effects of an individual’s past and present contexts and how they affect the present perceptions of events (Herr, 1996).

The learning theory of career counselling advocates that career awareness activities under school-to-work should begin around seventh grade. Students need to consider career choice as a learning process and give consideration to other career options as they mature. The learning theory of career counselling suggests that career tests can be used to make inferences about how students might fit into certain occupational environments and to pinpoint specific new learning goals rather than restrict individuals from aspiring to certain occupations. For example, personality tests can be used to identify existing personality types and preferences, and to help students learn to accommodate particular temperament styles. Identification of beliefs and values should also be encouraged and counsellors can help students re-examine identified self-defeating beliefs (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999).

The learning theory of career counselling suggests that students develop their own curiosity, and need to learn how to take advantage of unplanned events. They need to address questions...
such as, “What am I curious about?” (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999; p. 121). This theory encourages any intervention that promotes learning. These can include job club programs, the use of study materials in the form of books, articles and videotapes, the use of simulations so that students can explore a variety of occupational tasks, and cognitive-based interventions that focus on identifying and challenging self-defeating or maladaptive self-talk. Other options are behavioural interventions such as role-playing, behavioural rehearsal, relaxation techniques, assertion training, and modelling. Learning theory also advocates that career counsellors should play a major role in dealing with other concerns that have an affect on the school-to-work transition, not just occupational choice (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999).

Other school-to-work practices supported by the learning theory perspective include technical preparation programs that provide industry specific training, and school based enterprises that provide students with experiences and skills that tie in school education with real world applications, (e.g., school restaurants, production of newspapers, and multimedia projects). Mentoring, traineeships and apprenticeships are also included in the school-to-work practices. Mentoring, in particular, is closely aligned with social learning theory principles, but it is necessary for mentors to be given appropriate training in learning theory of career counselling methods (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999).

In summary, interventions based on learning theory of career counselling include:

- questioning techniques to promote exploration of curiosity
- exploration and learning activities such as job seeking procedures, simulations, cognitive and behavioural techniques
- promotion of training in academic and technical skills use
- use of assessment instruments to identify personality, career interests and goals and to
stimulate learning

. promotion of positive beliefs and outcomes

. help with examining self-defeating beliefs

CONCLUSION

The common themes that have emerged from the psychological theories discussed in this review form the basis for a student making a successful and adaptive transition. These themes are consistent with a number of propositions made by Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, Roarke, (1997) and can be summarised as follows:

1. Adopt a purposeful approach to options and tasks
2. Explore self-knowledge and relate these findings to educational and vocational interests
3. Engage in self-exploration in order to benefit from environmental exploration
4. Obtain support, advice and consultation from significant others
5. Obtain guidance from experienced counsellors
6. Obtain access to job settings that have supportive supervisors and co-workers
7. Obtain access to jobs that provide growth and advancement
8. Engage in further skill development
9. Seek out close relationships that provide emotional and instrumental support, as well as challenging interpersonal opportunities
10. Seek further education and vocational training opportunities.
Evidence was provided very early (Strong, 1943) that interests are sufficiently stable to allow for the prediction of future behaviours. This reinforces the importance of gaining self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, and decision-making skills, and that these should be taught in a developmental context. As early as 1909 Frank Parsons (1989) argued that in order to select a field of work, an individual should ideally have a clear understanding of themselves, their attitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions and their resource limitations, as well as a knowledge of the requirements and conditions of success in different lines of work. Parsons assumed that there is a relatively stable “self” waiting to be discovered, and if an individual looks carefully enough, there is also stability and certainty about the characteristics of different lines of work. It is timely that this advice provided relatively early in the twentieth century be acted upon.
REFERENCES


