

Career Counseling for Middle School Students

Caroline Keel

Ball State University

### Abstract

Career development is a lifelong journey linking an individual's characteristics and interests with the world surrounding the person and his or her work. When it comes to educating and counseling about careers in an elementary, middle, and high school it will look different, since there is an array of topics to focus on for each level of education. There are many theories that relate to teaching middle school students about career awareness, exploration, and process. However, Holland's Career Theory and Super's Lifespan Theory are two specific theories that are preferred. They are helpful for counselors to understand how to excel when teaching students about career development. Current literature was evaluated and discussed to help future school counselors understand and produce programs that fits the needs of all students.

### Career Counseling for Middle School Students

It is important to educate and assist students with career counseling as they move through childhood to adulthood. As a future professional school counselor, career counseling in elementary, middle, and high school looks different. However, the purpose of the paper is not to explain these differences, but to look deeper into middle school career counseling, which is also known as the time for exploration. There are many theories that focus upon career development, however two theories that can apply to middle school students are Holland's Career Theory and Super's Lifespan Theory. These two theories will be discussed in more detail throughout the paper. This paper will also focus on current programs that have been implemented in middle schools and the outcomes. Lastly, this paper will discuss future expectations and ideas for career counseling for middle school students.

### **Career Counseling in Schools**

Educating students about career counseling did not become important to the educational system until the early 1970s. At this time, educators and counselors began to realize that students were ill-prepared for work when they graduated high school (Zucker, 1994). The new career educational process focuses on certain topics throughout kindergarten to adulthood. According to Zucker (1994), the main topics included "career awareness, career exploration, value clarification, decision-making skills, career orientation, and career preparation" (p.14). These topics are taught at different levels according to a student's developmental stage.

Arrington (2000) believed that there are three stages through which students go during their educational development to fully understand their career choices. The stages

are awareness, exploration, and planning or preparation. Beginning in elementary school, student will start their life journey through career counseling, and they will first learn about awareness. Creating awareness at a young age will help students learn and be mindful of the different types of careers in society (Arrington, 2000). During the beginning stages, the students will begin to understand their attributes that will help them grow in their career development process.

The stage that follows career awareness is career exploration. This stage, typically occurring during middle school, is where students are trying to find themselves and understand the world around them. During this stage students are taught to discover more than just an understanding of different careers. They begin to study themselves based on their “interest, abilities, values, and needs” (Arrington, 2000, p. 104). A few programs or activities that schools have adopted in the past are job shadowing, career fairs, and assessments. Engaging in activities rather than being lectured is shown to help students understand and learn more about their interest and future ideas for career choices. (Perry, Liu, Pabian, 2010). Research has found that when career exploration is promoted and covered well, students are more likely to have a positive school engagement and academic achievement (Orthner, Akos, Rose, Jones-Sanpei, Mercado, & Wooley, 2010). Another step during the career exploration stage is helping students discover a more general area a career choices. When students are more familiar with their interest, which normally is during eighth grade, the school counselor begins their four-year plan for high school. This is also the time when school counselors become aware of whether a certain student is planning on going to college or straight into the workforce (Arrington, 2000).

The last stage for career counseling is career planning or preparation, which occurs during high school or even after. This stage is when students are focused on certain careers instead of multiple arrays of careers. Students will begin to do more involved activities that will help them understand their career more. For some students this means they will be looking into colleges that will help them pursue the career choice, and for other students they will be looking into the community for which they will be heading into the workforce right after graduation (Arrington, 2000). It is important to understand that while most students are going to go on to college, a school counselor should not try to change a student's decision if he or she feels that they want to go straight into the workforce right after high school graduation.

### **Career Development Theories**

Career counseling is unique for every student, and educating the students about how the journey is different for everyone is another important topic to discuss. Middle school is when students become more aware that their classmates are thinking differently than they are and, as previously mentioned, this stage of career counseling is called the exploration stage. For professional school counselors a few theories that correlate and associate well with middle school students during the career exploration stage are Holland's Career Theory and Super's Lifespan Theory.

Career development is a lifelong journey linking an individual's characteristics and interests with the world surrounding said person and his or her work. A person will learn to identify their individual key features of themselves during the career development process (Sharf, 2010). The two theories fall into two different categories within the concept of different career development theories. Holland's Career Theory is

considered in the psychological category because it matches personality types with the work environment (Toomey, Levinson, & Palmer, 2009). Super's Lifespan Theory is categorized in the developmental category because it focuses more on one's self-concept over life (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2008).

### **Holland's Career Theory**

Holland's theory is matching between personality and behavioral types along with work environment. There are six personality types to Holland's theory: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (Sharf, 2010). To determine an individual's personality type, the individual will take a test. There are multiple tests that are established based on Holland's theory, and one that is recommended in a middle school setting is called The Career Key personality test. Holland's idea of personality types appears to be one of the most stable ideas over time. Research has shown that the biggest disadvantage of this theory as a school counselor is that there is not an intuitive understanding as to developing an adequate example on how to work with students using this theory (Toomey, Levinson, & Palmer, 2009). However, there are many advantages of this theory in career counseling. The first advantage that Toomey, Levinson, and Palmer (2009) identified was that there the types are easily understood and students can relate to them in their everyday life. The second advantage is that the types are interesting and appealing to the students. The last advantage is that it provides alternative ways of learning about the work environment (Toomey, Levinson, & Palmer, 2009).

### **Super's Lifespan Theory**

Another theory that works well during middle school, which a school counselor may incorporate in his or her career counseling process, is Super's Lifespan Theory. This

theory consists of five stages and sixteen substages. Those five stages are growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. These stages are spread out throughout a person lifespan, hence the theory's name (Sharf, 2010). During middle school, an individual would still be going through the growth stage because, according to Sharf (2010), the exploration stage does not begin until 15 year of age. While students are going through the growth stage in middle school, they will also be going through two substages called interest and capacity. This is when they begin to identify likes and dislikes as the basis for career choices and incorporating reality more. Incorporating reality is when more students want to become what they hear or see during their everyday life. For example, when a student really likes a television show, they sometimes begin to want to adopt the career of their favorite character. Another example is when a student learns more about their parents' career and start to become more interested in it (Zunker, 1994). Students are more focused with their own interest and those of their parents during this stage. In later stages after middle school, students will begin to understand more realistic interests and explore careers more specific to their future goals (Sharf, 2010).

### **Current Programs in Middle Schools**

There are multiple career development programs introduced in middle schools all around the United States. A few programs are found to have problems when teaching because they are outdated or have to be changed because they were initially created for high school students. Trusty, Niles, and Carney (2005) found that reusing programs that were used for a higher development level is not adequate nor is altering those programs to make them fit for the age level. It is also found that career education in middle schools should be designed to allow students to learn more than one career (Trusty, Niles, &

Carney, 2005). The programs should also show students an array of examples on how a daily life would be in different careers. By doing this, it will allow students to not only focus on salary but also all the other aspects that will be involved. Middle school career education programs should involve physical activities, for instance job shadowing, interviews, and projects. The activities will hopefully start getting the students to understand even more about careers (Borgen & Hiebert, 2006). The school counselor needs to find a way to help students understand that the activities and subjects they are learning today will benefit them for their future career success. It is found that if students understand and relate things to their interests they are more likely to be involved and improve on academics (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005).

Mihyeon (2013) looked at the needs and issues that the gifted and high achieving students in middle school were having when learning about career development. The article mentioned that biggest myth that many believe about gifted and high achieving students is “that they are self-directed and know where they are heading (p. 27).” Students are often given accommodations and interventions to help them in their academics, however there is little effort to do the same when it comes to career-related. Even though gifted and high achieving students seem to understand and act more mature than most of their peers, along with not needing as much help when it comes to certain aspects. They are still middle school students trying to understand what is going on in their lives when everything is changing. These middle school students are advanced, however that does not mean they are prepared to understand how to set their goals to reach the career they want to pursue (Mihyeon, 2013). They may not even know what their future career choice is yet even though they are seen as high achieving students. As

it has been mentioned before a student's career journey or career development is not the same for every student.

### **Future for Career Counseling in Middle Schools**

Career counseling in middle schools is a key component in students' lives. At a time where everything else seems so confusing a school counselor can reduce some confusion if he or she understands some of the main points previously mentioned. When creating a career development program, school counselors must create one that accommodates to the age level of the students and understanding that not every student learns at the same pace. It is also crucial for school counselors to understand the Holland's and Super's theory and the stages to help them produce program that fits the needs of all students.

## References

- Arrington, K. (2000). Middle grade career planning programs. *Journal of Career Development, 27*, 103-109.
- Borgen, W. & Heibert, B. (2006). Career guidance and counseling for youth: What adolescents and young adults are telling us. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 28*, 389-400.
- Hartung, P.J., Porfeli, E.J., & Vondracek, F.W. (2008). Career adaptability in childhood. *The Career Development Quarterly, 57*, 63-74.
- Mihyeon, K. (2013). Focusing on the future experience from a career-related program for high-ability students and their parents. *Gifted Child Today, 36*(1), 27-34. doi: 10.1177/1076217512465283
- Orthner, D.K., Akos, P., Rose, R., Jones-Sanpei, H., Mercado, M., & Wooley, M.E. (2010). CareerStart: A middle school student engagement and academic achievement program. *Children & Schools, 32*(4), 223-234.
- Perry, J.C., Liu, X., & Pabian, Y. (2010). School engagement as a mediator of academic performance among urban youth: The role of career preparation, parental career support, and teacher support. *The Counseling Psychologist, 38*(2), 269-295. doi: 10.1177/0011000009349272
- Sharf, R.S. (2010). *Applying Career Development Theory to Assessment*. Belmont, CA: Brook/Cole Cengage Learning.
- Toomey, K.D., Levingson, E.M., & Palmer, E.J. (2009). A test of holland's theory of vocational personality and work environment. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 46*, 82-93.

Trusty, J., Niles, S., & Carney, J.V. (2005). Education-career planning and middle school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 9*(2), 136-143.

Zunker, V.G. (1994). *Career Counseling Applied Concept of Life Planning*. Belmont, CA: Brook/Cole Cengage Learning.