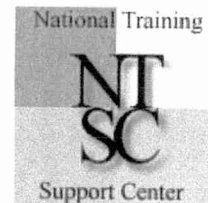
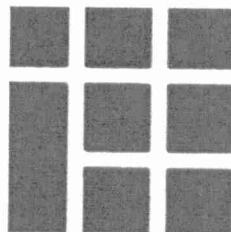


School-Based Career Development: A Synthesis of the Literature

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Abstract

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Amendments of 1998 extended support for “career guidance and academic counseling.” A wide variety of such interventions are in existence. Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes evidence-based education, it is important to examine the research to determine the value of these programs. This synthesis of the research literature, covering meta-analyses and individual studies on comprehensive guidance programs, career courses, counseling interventions and computer-assisted career guidance, finds many benefits to students of career guidance and academic counseling interventions. On a variety of career-related and academic measures, student subjects did have increased outcomes. However, there are also limitations to the interventions and to the research methods studying them. Many of the interventions are short-term, low-dosage activities, with lasting benefits unclear. In addition, much of the research relies on self-reported responses to psychological inventories. Based on the findings of the research review, recommendations are to focus practice and research on middle-school students, and target resources towards ensuring that all middle- and high-school students have regular conferences with counselors to discuss their current and future academic programs. Finally, research should focus on exploring the relationships between guidance interventions and positive student behaviors, rather than attitudes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In general, this review of the career guidance and academic counseling literature has produced many positive findings. Meta-analyses have found positive impacts of career guidance. Researchers have found benefits to students of comprehensive guidance programs, career courses, academic counseling and computer-based guidance systems. However, there are also limitations to these interventions and to the research methods studying them.

With regard to comprehensive guidance programs, much more research is needed. The attempts of Lapan, Gysbers and their colleagues to use statewide data to uncover relationships between the implementation of such programs and student outcomes are admirable. However, their research relies on self-report of variables such as student GPA, which would be better reported through transcripts. In addition, it would be useful to have a conceptual model explaining how the different elements of comprehensive guidance programs might impact students' grades and other variables.

Students do seem to benefit, both vocationally and academically, from participation in career courses. In particular, they seem to increase their knowledge of careers and their ability to make career-related decisions. On most career-related measures, students did see increased outcomes when compared with students not enrolled in a career course. In the one study exploring academic measures (Fouad, 1995), participants in a career course did improve academically. However, there is little evidence that any gains—either academic or career-related—are maintained over time.

The few studies on academic counseling or advising showed positive findings. It is interesting that this very common but rather low-profile intervention, helping students

plan their secondary school program, appears to be valuable according to certain academic measures. And the meta-analyses found that, of the different types of career guidance interventions, individual counseling interventions were most effective. This simple planning intervention may help students understand the connections between their goals and the necessary steps to take towards them. Thus this intervention is potentially very effective, but more research is needed.

Computer-assisted career guidance programs appear to contribute to students' career development, according to some career-focused inventories. However, these interventions were very short-term and the research tended to consist solely of pre- and post-test inventories, sometimes administered less than a week apart. As more than one author pointed out, the level of dosage of some of the interventions was quite low. With such small amounts of treatment, it is unclear what long-term benefits students might gain. It is also unclear whether computer-assisted programs alone or in combination with other interventions are most effective. Some have found that computer-based interventions by themselves fail to match outcomes produced in combination with some other intervention (Meier, 1991), while others have found that adding a computer program to a career course produces no additional benefits beyond the course alone (Garis & Niles, 1990).

One limitation found in common to many of the interventions and the research is that they focus on change in students' knowledge, and even more commonly, their attitudes. Students' actual behaviors were a minor focus, as in the studies that examined the effects of career courses on students' later course-taking, or research examining the relationship between academic counseling and later academic achievement. The element

of time was also a weakness in much of the research. Much like a history test that measures what students have learned in a half-semester of a history course, inventories were used to measure the digestion of career information, or a change in an attitude. In most cases no follow-up research was conducted over time to see the lasting nature of any knowledge gain or attitude change, or the relationship of these with actions taken later.

There is general agreement that career development is a desirable part of schooling, and there is evidence that many different types of career guidance interventions are effective, according to the measures chosen. Yet, the research overall does not help us in determining the optimum content of or method of delivery of career guidance. We have reviewed various interventions, but because of the diversity of goals, methods and measures, a clear direction for policy in this area is still unclear. We can, however, recommend the following:

Other career development activities that are more experiential in nature have been found to positively influence such variables as school attendance and completion. Compared to these types of activities, many of the guidance interventions reviewed seem inauthentic and artificial. Until additional research is done, students should engage in a variety of career development activities that complement one another.

Given the finding that career guidance and academic counseling is potentially very effective with middle school students, a greater investment in these activities in the middle schools should be made, and future research should be focused there as well.

Academic counseling appears to be a straightforward and cost-effective way to improve student outcomes. Resources should be targeted to ensure that all middle- and

high-school students have regular conferences with counselors to discuss their current and future academic programs.

Finally, research should focus on exploring the relationships between guidance interventions and positive student behaviors.