Career counselling with secondary school-aged youth: Directions for theory, research, and practice

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Abstract
In the midst of an information age and a global economy, people around the world continue to face significant inequities at school and in the workforce. Career counselling thus finds itself in a paradigm shift that increasingly stresses the influences of culture and sociopolitical context. One area in which the profession can advance a social justice agenda is through the school-to-work movement. In this article, directions for theory, research, and practice with secondary school-aged youth are discussed using a psychology of working perspective. Specifically, the roles of self-determination theory, critical consciousness, and social support are presented as synergistic mechanisms for fostering school engagement and preventing school dropout. To this end, higher education is viewed as a key institutional partner with programmes based inside and outside of the school.

As the 21st century unfolds amidst great promise and uncertainty, career counselling must adjust to a rapidly changing landscape of work, information, and technology. At the same time, the profession cannot overlook the vast divisions in wealth and opportunity that persist between the have’s and have not’s of the world, even within highly industrialized nations. In response to advancements of the global economy, on the one hand, and to the serious moral challenges of inequity that people face across the globe, on the other, career counselling finds itself in the midst of a paradigm shift that increasingly stresses the role of context and culture (Fassinger 2008; Fouad and Bynner 2008). It may also be a sign that many career development scholars are only now catching up with familiar truisms about work that exist around most of the world.

In North America, a number of theorists have created their own models with their own terminology for advancing postmodern schools of thought (e.g., Cochran 1997; Cook, Heppner and O’Brien 2005; Fitzgerald and Weitzman 1992; Savickas 2002; Young, Valach and Collin 2002). Yet, regardless of the special emphases and unique language (e.g., ecological, feminist, constructivist, narrative, contextual) endorsed, they all ultimately share the same assumption that career counselling cannot be accurately understood or effectively applied without understanding how social contexts and systems provide meaning and purpose and bear life consequences. This
is a general trend in thinking that has led to the creation of complex studies using non-traditional methods (e.g., qualitative, mixed methods) conducted on diverse populations that fall outside the status quo of career development research, namely, White middle-class college students.

Because of these emerging trends in philosophical perspectives and programmes of research, scholars are asking (or re-asking) basic questions with no simple answer. Do people experience the same work-related struggles across different countries? Does everyone share these struggles within the same country, for that matter? Can societies benefit from the same solutions? Public schools are one of the most dynamic settings to address these issues. Based on three coordinated reviews of career guidance policies (i.e., OECD, European Commission, and the World Bank) that covered 37 countries, Watts and Sultana (2004, 111) noted that the first major general point was that career education and guidance in schools are critical in ‘not only in helping young people to make the immediate choices that confront them but also in laying the foundations for lifelong learning and lifelong career development’.

In this article, I focus on emerging research and educational reforms that advances this widespread consensus by bringing together the forces of secondary education, higher education, and public policy on an international scale, though the discussion is primarily situated within the context of South Africa and the United States.

To be sure, the philosophical underpinnings of a postmodern sensibility are not that new. In fact, South African scholars were among the first in our field to challenge the idea that people have ‘choice’ in their careers (Mathabe and Temane 1993; Watts 1980). According to a recent review of career psychology in South Africa, Nicholas, Naidoo, and Pretorius (2006, 2) reified this basic point: ‘Crites (1969) identified three necessary conditions for vocational choice to occur: an individual must possess alternatives, a motivation to choose, and the freedom to choose. It would be rhetorical to ask whether all three conditions have been present in the life experiences of all young South Africans ...’. This article expands on these early and ongoing critiques of conventional paradigms. First, to establish an international framework of public policy in education, the school-to-work (STW) movement in South Africa and the United States is briefly reviewed; by the term school-to-work, I refer to the developmental transition from high school into the workforce or post-secondary training (Blustein, Perry and DeWine 2004). Second, a psychology of working (Blustein 2006) and related principles (i.e., self-determination, critical consciousness, social support) is offered as a new approach for advancing the STW transition. Finally, educational reform initiatives concerning out-of-school time programmes and youth mentoring programmes are discussed as mechanisms for facilitating STW in an effort to prevent school dropout, with higher education serving as a key institutional partner.
Policy analysts in the United States have referred to the pervasive problem of school dropout as a ‘silent epidemic’ and an ‘invisible crisis’ (Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison 2006; Orfield, Losen, Wald and Swanson 2004), where it disproportionately affects urban youth of color in comparison to their White suburban counterparts (Balfanz and Legters 2004). Indeed, the high-stakes issues stemming from the achievement gap are widely recognized in the U.S. as the educational agenda. The same fundamental divisions in achievement and opportunity are witnessed in post-apartheid South Africa, where historical vestiges of ‘Bantu education’ remain. Frederick (2008) observed that for every 10,000 African primary school children, only 27 will pass the matric exams well enough to attend a university. In the United States, minority youth (i.e., American Indians, Hispanics, and Blacks) have about a fifty-fifty chance of earning a high school diploma on time (Swanson 2004).

Deficits in basic resources abound in South Africa’s schools, including lack of computer technology, lack of access to sanitary drinking water, and under-qualified teachers (South African Consulate General 2008). As Kozol (1991) once stated, these ‘savage inequalities’ are also a reality across America’s inner-city schools. Indeed, urban youth of color frequently have to cope with crowded classrooms, poor school climate, low teacher morale, outdated textbooks, gang violence, little computer technology, and lower learning expectations (Anyon 1997; Oakes 1985). Against the backdrop of this glaring crisis, standards of achievement and performance are still rising, in part as a means of educating a population that must compete in a knowledge-based economy (Marshall and Tucker 1992; Reich 1992). To compete in a global economy, employers demand a workforce equipped with competencies that go beyond basic academic skills, such as creative thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, communication skills, technological skills, and perspective taking (Grubb 2004), as outlined by the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (1991), or the SCANS Report. In this report, the concept of work-readiness is based upon a foundation of academic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities (e.g., responsibility, honesty, sociability). The passage of the School to Work Opportunities Act (STWA; 1994) gave funds for states to combine career education with the traditional academic curriculum. While the STWA expired in 2002, its basic philosophy continues to be employed in a variety of ways across the U.S. (e.g., career academies, tech-prep programs, job shadowing), despite the mantra of standardized achievement tests (Olson 1997).

All over the African continent, there is a growing need for educational reform that echoes the central message behind the school-to-work movement. At the Meeting of the Bureau of the Conference of Ministers of Education of the African Union in May 2007, a strategy to revitalize technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was laid out; specifically, it recognized the ‘importance of TVET as a means of empowering individuals to take control of their lives’ and hence recommended...
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‘the integration of vocational training into the general education system’ (African Union 2008, 5). Among the Bureau’s proposals was the goal to eradicate perceptions of TVET as being relegated to unmotivated or low-achieving students. In the U.S., perhaps the sharpest critique has been based on the false idea that STW closes the door on youth who might pursue a college degree, operating as a form of tracking and classism. This criticism is unsupported. In fact, the STW approach encourages students typically disaffected by the traditional academic curriculum to move into all kinds of higher education, such as community colleges, technical schools, and private universities (Gysbers 1997). Based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Visher, Bhandari and Medrich (2004) found that participants in high school career exploration programs were more likely than non-participants to graduate from high school and attend college, even after controlling for other student and school characteristics. Studies in several disciplines have consistently linked achievement, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status with career development (Castellano, Stringfield and Stone 2003; Lapan, Gysbers and Petroski 2001). Another common misperception is the idea that STW forces students to make career decisions prematurely. This line of reasoning is also unfounded. Aside from lack of evidence, this assertion overlooks the fact that many students make critical life decisions (e.g., dropping out, using drugs) prior to the 11th grade (Weidman and Friedmann 1984), and fails to consider that over 70% of new jobs do not require a bachelor’s degree (Hoyt 2001). Of course, this does not mean that students should not think about going to college; to the contrary, it enjoins professionals to engage students in exploring a variety of goals, while helping them see that any form of further education and training pays dividends.

Unlike America, South Africa is not only trying to reverse remnants of the apartheid regime, but is also fighting against an epidemic of poverty and unemployment. The competing interests of rebuilding the workforce through a world-class education, while, at the same time, attempting to solve widespread joblessness, has created a core tension among South Africa’s guiding principles of reform at all levels of education. The national government has referred to the ‘second economy’ to capture this dual challenge. As the deficit is reduced and interest rates are lowered, the majority of South Africans have not seen standards of living improve (Kraak 2005). In contrast to the smooth, rapid transition to democracy, the economic transition has been hampered by an array of political problems related to government management and the financial operations of the National Skills Development Strategy designed to integrate academic education and occupational training (Burger and Woolard 2005). The uneven distribution of job training opportunities has not been resolved in South Africa’s workforce (Paterson and Du Toit 2005).

When taking this macro-level issue into the context of scholarship in career development, Stead (1996) observed that the historical influences of apartheid are a major reason why Black African adolescents exhibit low interest in Enterprising occupations (Holland 1997). He also postulated that Black students tend to regard Social and Investigative types as more interesting than other career types due to
collectivistic values. He concluded that individual differences undoubtedly exist, but a legacy of segregation has severely constrained that natural variation. To break down these barriers, career guidance is critically needed in the secondary schools; indeed, adolescence is a developmental period when vocational exploration becomes increasingly salient to their self-concept (Nurmi 1991; Super 1990). Unfortunately, career counselling in schools is sorely lacking in South Africa, just as it currently is within the United States (Stead and Watson 1998). As Akhurst and Mkhize (2006, 139) observed, ‘Career education practice in South Africa still reflects the marked inequalities that characterised apartheid education structures’.

A PSYCHOLOGY OF WORKING PERSPECTIVE

As South Africa underwent political changes, Stead (1996) proposed a developmental contextual framework for career development. More specifically, he described how educational, familial, economic, cultural, and individual factors can be thought of as dynamically interacting in order to accurately understand the career development of Black South African adolescents. The developmental contextual model (Vondracek, Lerner and Schulenberg 1986) is an extension of Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) original contributions to theories of human development; as such, it is a grand meta-perspective rather than a theory organized by specific constructs. Aside from casting broad conceptual statements about the confluence of multiple variables to consider across the lifespan at multiple levels, there is no systematic way to support or refute the developmental contextual model because it does not provide a clear set of falsifiable hypotheses. Building on Stead’s (1996) timely contributions, a psychology of working perspective (Blustein 2006) offers a framework for transforming the career concerns of minority youth in South Africa and nations around the globe. In contrast to a developmental contextual approach, a psychology of working is explicit about its proposal to move towards a social justice agenda. It also views work as a phenomenon of greater relevance to the ordinary worker than a ‘career’ for professionals. According to Blustein (2006), the person-environment fit ideology of choice that has dominated conventional theories is biased toward a small segment of people, namely, those who enjoy the socioeconomic luxuries of being able to clarify their career preferences and fine-tune their choices without serious consideration of the daily worries, oppressive conditions, and economic hardships that most workers face on the planet. The idea of a career, Blustein argues, is a cultural artifact if we agree that the assumption of a linear path of mobility, fair treatment, and dignity in the workplace is not true for everyone, even among middle-class workers.

Because work is an everyday fact concerning survival and power (that is, access to and/or control over resources, goods, and services), a psychology of working offers a more meaningful language of ideas and avenues of change that, until recently, has been largely fragmented and inaccessible within the field. While a detailed account of a psychology of working is precluded, a number of its key ideas merit attention. I focus on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) and specifically discuss
how two inter-related constructs can enhance the autonomy and school engagement of minority youth during the STW transition: (a) critical consciousness and (b) social support. These mechanisms of volitional behaviour hold great promise for advancing the ‘self-liberation’ that Mathabe and Temane (1993) called for in South Africa.

**SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT**

Compared to the dominant force of social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown and Hackett 2002), self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000) has been virtually neglected as an alternative model for studying self-regulated behaviour within the field. Blustein (2006) argues that SDT has tremendous potential in explaining and changing behavior, even in conditions that fail to provide an outlet for personality expression. Despite the reality that most people work because it is a means to an end (e.g., paying the bills), Blustein asserts that SDT can help us understand how people derive meaning and persist in their working lives with a sense of pride and motivation. Juntunen and Wettersten’s (2006, 97) notion of work hope has conceptual overlap with self-determination, as it is defined as a ‘positive motivational state that is directed at work and work-related goals’. The authors distinguish work hope from self-efficacy by delineating the role that emotions, intentions, and purpose play: ‘Whereas some clients are likely to benefit most from believing that they are capable of obtaining a goal, others may be best served by focusing on their willingness or drive to pursue a goal’ (Juntunen and Wettersten 2006, 104).

In short, SDT is a theoretical account of well-being that views humans as endowed with propensities that strive to meet three basic psychological needs: (a) autonomy, or the need to experience an agentic, authentic sense of choice in behavior, (b) competence, or the need to feel effective in mastering specific tasks or performing in specific situations, and (c) relatedness, or the need to experience a gratifying connection with others and feel a sense of belongingness. To the extent that these three core needs are satisfied, people will function in a more optimal, self-regulating manner that leads to growth and vitality. A crucial principle of motivation commonly referred to as internalization represents a process of becoming self-determined in one’s decision-making and behaviour, which dovetails with the fulfillment of competence and relatedness.

The principle of internalization is conceptualised as occurring along a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation. In intrinsic states of motivation, Deci and Ryan (1985, 1991) propose that people engage in an activity for its own sake (e.g., fun, pleasure), reflecting the highest level of autonomy. On the other hand, extrinsic states of motivation occur when people behave as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Extrinsic motivation ranges from low to high levels of autonomy, depending on one’s style of internalization; hence, extrinsic states are classified as: (a) external regulation, or doing something for a reward or to avoid a sanction, (b) introjected regulation, or doing something out of guilt or anxiety, the need for approval and/or
a false image of self-worth (i.e., for socio-emotional reasons that are not internally accepted by, or identified with, one’s authentic sense of self), and (c) *integrative regulation*, or doing something because one identifies with the instrumental value, social purpose, goals, or needs of an activity. In contrast to an *introjected* style of regulation, which is characterised by behaviour that is self-controlling and thus less satisfying, people who internalize motivation in an *integrative* manner do not experience internal conflict or feel that their identity is threatened; instead, they accept responsibility for their actions, take initiative, and derive a greater sense of volition in what they decide to do when pursuing their goals (see Deci, Eghrari, Patrick and Leone 1994; Deci and Ryan 1991). When external regulations are transformed into internal regulations consistent with one’s values, beliefs, purposes, or goals, then self-determination is said to optimally occur.

Around the world, many at-risk youth do not view their futures with the same degree of optimism, or approach school with the same attitudes, compared to their affluent and/or socially privileged counterparts. Instead of representing a normal reality that everyone experiences, the common portrayal of adolescence as a time of being free to ‘try on’ new interests and identities has been criticized by researchers who implicitly challenge the universality of the ‘moratorium’ stage (Marcia 1980) as favoring groups in relative economic and social prosperity. Students are often unmotivated to learn because they do not perceive a meaningful connection between what they are being taught and what they value in terms of their future goals (cf. Hock, Deshler and Schumaker 2006). Hence, students become bored and withdraw interest and effort from school, resorting to sources of self-esteem and a sense of control that results in school drop out, truancy, behavioral misconduct, health risk behaviors, and gang activity. As Oyserman, Gant, and Ager (1995, 1229) note, ‘When poverty and unemployment are chronically high, the perceived connection between one’s current efforts to do well in school and one’s future possibilities as an adult may be severely attenuated .... Lack of success or failure in school may not be viewed as self-defining to the extent that it is not viewed as linked to one’s future chances as an adult’. How can an integrated self-regulatory mechanism, then, be constructed in an imperfect, unfair world? From a career development perspective, I suggest that such internalization can occur through the facilitation of school engagement (Perry 2008) and thereby help pierce generational cycles of disadvantage by preventing school dropout that arises from a lack of self-determination. While school engagement can be viewed as signifying behaviours like attendance and homework, it also speaks to the psychosocial aspects of how youth identify with the value/purpose of school, and the extent to which they are invested in learning (see Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004).

Based on SDT, Skinner and Edge (2002) proposed a motivational model that views self-regulated engagement and coping (in cognitive, social, and personality development) as being determined by how autonomy is instilled in the context of supportive relationships and structures that build competence. Consistent with their model, Reeve (2002) reviewed 20 years of research to support the premise
that students who integrate extrinsic reasons for engaging in school tend to succeed. While Reeve focused on how teachers can support autonomy, there is considerable potential for adults linked to the school system to collaborate with teachers. According to Reeve (2002), an integrative self-regulatory style is characterized by: (a) a meaningful rationale for school success is constructed by the student, (b) the student’s perspective is validated by others, and (c) a sense of self-agency or volition is cultivated. Drawing from the premise that school engagement is regulated by autonomous self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1992) argued that that extrinsically motivated patterns of school behaviour can be integrated with one’s identity, provided that the internalization does not threaten his/her core values and beliefs. Hence, the so-called ‘meaningful rationale,’ feelings of genuine validation, and internal drive to persist are dependent on how sensitive adults are to sociocultural context, including what is deemed to be possible (or impossible) based on youths’ experiences (Perry 2008; Perry and Vance in press). To facilitate such meaning, critical consciousness and social support are worthy of consideration, though they have been relatively neglected thus far within the canon of vocational psychology.

THE ROLE OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The concept of critical consciousness is an uncharted, fertile area of inquiry within the field of vocational psychology. Based on their review, Diemer and Blustein (2006) noted two components: (a) sociopolitical analysis, referring to an examination, questioning, or rejection of a dominant ideology, and (b) sociopolitical control, or the capacity to move from an awareness of inequity to actions that transform those inequities. In short, critical consciousness can be defined as a set of values, attitudes, or ideologies that shape how one views societal relations and social justice in the world. Depending on how such attitudes are internalized, some people may remain oblivious to, unconsciously suppress, or consciously deny their thoughts and feelings, whereas others may affirm their perceptions and develop a source of inner strength or resilience.

Diemer and Blustein (2006) view this construct as a protective factor for overcoming vocational barriers among minority groups. In the context of STW transition, it is viewed as a psychological process influencing the maintenance of goal-directed behaviour. Based on large-scale panel data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, Diemer (2009) provided support for this premise by examining the occupational attainment of low-income youth of color 8 years after high school graduation. After controlling for academic performance, 12th grade sociopolitical development, or ‘the consciousness of and motivation to transform sociopolitical inequity,’ exerted a positive effect on job expectations in the 12th grade as well as occupational attainment (i.e., higher status, higher-paying jobs) later on in adulthood.

Due to a perceived restriction of job opportunities and a significant lack of representation within certain professions (e.g., lawyers, physicians, engineers),
minority youth may resort to ‘oppositional’ coping strategies that reduces their investment in school. This anti-education mentality may be overcome, though, by a critical consciousness that protects against a pervasive cynicism and sense of hopelessness (Oyserman and Fryberg 2006). In a similar vein, Yowell (2002) posited that ideological content may influence the motivation for pursuing career and academic goals. She contends that beliefs about the ‘American Dream’ (i.e., equal opportunity, upward mobility) can shape urban youths’ conceptions of their future, and, in turn, their risk for school dropout. Indeed, a growing body of research supports the notion that a critical, complex awareness of the self and society (typically based on racial identity) provides academic resilience for Black youth in the United States (see Perry 2007). This is not to say that adolescents who lack a critical consciousness should be seen as living a naïve Pollyanish illusion. Rather, such attitudes remind us how alternative points of view become lost through prevailing ideologies.1

As adolescents look to the future, they may consider encountering social barriers that could impede their progress. The construct known as perceptions of barriers (McWhirter 1997) resembles that notion, but is not synonymous with critical consciousness. Recent studies suggest that higher perceptions of barriers tend to be associated with negative career outcomes such as low career aspirations (Jackson, Kacanski, Rust and Beck 2006), low expectations (Kenny and Bledsoe 2005), low prestige levels of career choice (Flores and O’Brien 2002) and a restricted range of occupational options (Lease 2006) among minority at-risk youth. In commenting on social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown and Hackett 2002), Fouad (personal communication, June 2007) found it a dubious premise that identifying barriers would provide the impetus or the capacity to overcome obstacles. Perceptions of barriers do not tap into the meanings of such perceptions and how they serve to motivate people. In this respect, critical consciousness can be construed as an aspect of career maturity (Savickas 1990) insofar as it functions as a source of motivation, persistence, and a sophisticated degree of reality testing.

To date, critical consciousness has not been studied in South Africa’s secondary schools. A few studies investigating perceptions of barriers, however, have created an initial knowledge base. In examining factors influencing the career choices of technikon students, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) found that the same barriers identified by U.S. college students (e.g., lack of money, lack of information) were expressed in their sample. Patton, Creed, and Watson (2003) looked at perception of barriers among an Australian and South African sample of secondary students. Consistent with Luzzo’s (1996) hypothesis, their results indicated that perception of barriers was inversely related with career planning and certainty. The authors did not address, however, the role of critical consciousness; the samples were based on White suburban students, which is reflective of previous studies examining perceptions of barriers in South Africa (Eaton, Watson, Foxcroft and Patton 2004). Quite interestingly, Stead, Els and Fouad (2004) found that the majority of both Black and White high school students (79 to 86%) did not perceive gender discrimination as a vocational barrier; moreover, racial discrimination was perceived to be most
problematic among White students (56%). The authors speculated that such findings may have reflected a naïve view of discrimination in the workforce.

In South Africa, studies have consistently shown that Black and Coloured students tend to have lower levels of career maturity compared to White South Africans (Hickson and White 1989; Reid-Van Niekerk and Van Niekerk 1990; Watson and Smith 1999; Watson, Stead and De Jager 1995). This research is largely derived, however, from university samples. According to Stead and Watson (1998), differences in career maturity may be confounded by differences in cultural characteristics and economic factors between groups in South Africa. This criticism is aligned with research that asks the same questions for American youth (see Chaves et al. 2001). Yet, an alternative account for such differences could be due to other key dimensions of career maturity omitted from previous research, including critical consciousness and social support.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

In addition to critical consciousness, social support is another important, yet overlooked, factor that can contribute to school engagement through STW. While social support is essentially a household word across the psychological sciences and professions, its empirical basis in career development is sparse. Indeed, there are very few models that conceptualise social support as an integral construct of career development. Promoting an autonomous, integrative self-regulatory style for approaching schoolwork and future career goals vis-à-vis mechanisms of social support is a promising area of research that can be naturally linked to existing policies in education that emphasize the role of mentoring and non-parental adults.

As one way to formulate the origins and maintenance of self-determination as a result of social support for autonomy, Schultheiss’ (2003) relational perspective of career development is a viable framework. According to Schultheiss, relationships across many domains (e.g., parents, siblings, extended family, significant others) serve as sources of maturation for career decision-making and transitions. The spectrum of past and present relational influences is thought to help people in adapting to career tasks and concerns. This perspective is consistent with a psychology of working, which espouses the notion that work functions as a source of connection, both in the social realm and a deeper psychological sense of emotional attachment (Blustein 2006). But it is not the presence of relationships per se that leads to academic self-determination. South, Baumer, and Lutz (2003) noted that a paucity of evidence confirms the idea that parental support explains dropout rates and grades of youth living in poverty. Based on a latent growth curve analysis of NELS:88 data over four years of high school, Fan (2001) found that parental communication, supervision, and participation failed to predict achievement in reading, math, science, and social studies. Taken together, social support in and of itself does not necessarily translate into school behaviour committed to learning and future goals; it may be more accessible when relationships (from teachers, mentors, etc.) empathically gain access
to knowing youths’ hopes, expectations, and fears through intentional listening and a dialogue that validates, rather than downplays, experiences of oppression (Perry and Vance in press). This is a crucial point that has received growing attention in teacher education as well (Valenzuela 1999). Based on an ethnographic study of 9 Puerto Rican youth and 14 teachers at an urban high school, Rolon-Dow (2005), for example, captured the distinction in field notes and interviews between teachers who care, but who don’t know about (or are not interested in) where their students come from, versus caring that is concerned with fostering an authentic conversation that may be difficult to process.

Based on a study examining images of becoming career scientists among 41 high school girls, Packard and Nguyen (2003) found that activities which provided mentoring relationships were the most salient mechanisms for helping them negotiate their career plans. Past research supports the notion that important relationships can play a vital role in developing autonomy for pursuing vocational goals (e.g., Noonan et al. 2004; Pearson and Bieschke 2001; Schultheiss et al. 2002; Kenny et al. 2003). The will to ‘keep on going’ must often find strength amid unsafe, unfair, or uncertain conditions which derail people from goals they have set, despite possessing adequate skills, knowledge, and self-confidence (Phillips 1997). Self-efficacy, however, is not typically investigated with social support. In a rare study, Ali, McWhirter, and Chronister (2005) found that sibling and peer support, but not parental support, predicted vocational/educational self-efficacy among low-income youth. In another study, Ali and Saunders (2006) found that self-efficacy and perceptions of parental support predicted college expectations of rural students, although parental support exhibited a stronger effect than self-efficacy.

Consonant with a social justice perspective, relationships that support autonomy and school engagement may be critical to interventions which seek to instill perseverance among at-risk youth. While an adolescent may express high levels of self-efficacy, he or she may decide to pursue occupational options which seem economically exigent. Thus, youth may require a relationship that buffers them from adversities that overstretch their normal coping mechanisms. As I have suggested, the three components of an integrative self-regulatory style may converge around social support and critical consciousness. As for school engagement, youth mentoring is grounded in an approach to career education that provides a stream of ‘teaching moments’ from which mentees develop resilience and academic motivation (Rhodes 2002). Youth mentoring offers young people the chance to identify with a role model who can facilitate self-efficacy, self-esteem, and career exploration skills. Previous research supports the academic benefits of youth mentoring such as academic achievement and college enrollment rates (e.g., DuBois and Karcher 2005; Tierney and Grossman 1995). Mentoring yields only modest effects, however, if terminated in less than a year (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper 2002). Future research needs to address how specific elements of career interventions and youth mentoring can function to prevent dropout in cost-effective ways across multiple settings and phases of adolescence.
FINDING A MERGER AMONG MULTIPLE SYSTEMS

Despite different histories and educational systems with distinct needs, South Africa and the United States share many priorities in common with respect to preparing young people for the global economy and 21st century work skills (Akhurst and Mkhize 2006). Career guidance and education is often relegated, though, to a minor role in school budgets and resources (Bloch 1996). The teach-to-the-test ideology of ‘results’ in the U.S. sharply contrasts with the holistic curriculum reforms existing in East Asian countries like China and Singapore that emphasise innovation, creativity, and character development (Smink 2007).

To fundamentally change how career counselling in schools is greeted, the profession must not only provide a clear, persuasive theoretical argument, but must bolster that argument with research and interventions that demonstrate change in outcomes (e.g., grades, test scores, attendance, grade promotion, graduation rates) that matter to stakeholders in public education. Otherwise, school-to-work programmes risk sounding like another fad that recycles old ideas and fails to deliver tangible results in academic performance. There is plenty of evidence to draw from in the United States to use as a rationale; the problem is that such evidence has not found a compelling language or ‘defensible’ way to be presented so that it is seen as a legitimate vehicle of change. The lack of attention makes it even less likely for scholars to engage in this research.

According to several meta-analyses of career education interventions among school-aged students (Baker and Taylor 1998; Evans and Burck 1992), those programs that impact academic achievement at the greatest level occur over an extended period of time (averaging 2 years), are delivered consistently with a large ‘dosage’ effect (150 to 200 hours of direct exposure), and compliments language arts or math. In many high-income nations where school-to-work is decentralised, such as the United States, these empirical guidelines may sound unrealistic for every school district to provide. Yet, international research has made is abundantly clear that career education and guidance is directly tied to lifelong learning, the labor market, and social equity (Watts and Sultana 2004). Simply adding a ‘taster’ course or a ‘career day’ as a minor appendage to the curriculum will not make an impact. I do not suggest that every nation adopt the dualistic system of STW in countries like Germany; however, school-to-work programmes must not be marginalized. They need to secure linkages in the community that provide STW services in a comprehensive manner, whether they occur in the private or public sector.

In my view, it seems that STW can gain better leverage in secondary education if it is regarded as a solution to any multi-pronged approach to school dropout prevention: this is a shift that requires our theories and constructs to be explicitly connected to educational outcomes (e.g., school engagement) and school-linked services (e.g., mentoring, after-school programmes) that stakeholders can easily grasp in a familiar language. While it is well-known which factors place certain students at-risk for dropout (e.g., poverty, gender, race), we know very little about
what makes programmes effective in reducing school dropout (Doll and Hess 2001). Based on their extensive review of 217 articles, Prevatt and Kelly (2003) found that only 18 of them met all of the following criteria: (a) published in a peer-reviewed journal, (b) described an intervention that was identified as related to school dropout, (c) included an empirical analysis of its effectiveness, and (d) used a measure of school dropout as one of the dependent variables or outcomes.

Given the growing need for empirical accountability and programmes that explain how change is achieved based on theory, career counselling programmes housed in higher education can serve as a key partner with schools and non-profit organizations. Scholars and professionals in the fields of vocational psychology, counsellor education, and school counselling clearly have the research competencies, theoretical knowledge, and practical skills to assist school-based or community-based programs to develop, evaluate, improve, and expand their services (Romano and Kachgal 2004; Walsh, Galassi, Murphy and Park-Taylor 2002). Today, non-governmental organizations that promote public goals and social welfare are taking on a major role in public policy (Grubb 2004). In addition to providing enrichment activities, leadership activities, social support, and the like, after-school programmes in the U.S., for example, are being heavily funded to compensate for the lack of academic progress made during regular school hours. Moreover, they are expected to prepare students’ work competitiveness in a global economy, a trend that is occurring in South Africa, Russia, and Spain (Schneider-Munoz and Politz 2007). Because these needs are converging in out-of-school settings, an innovative partnership between programmes in career counselling, schools, and agencies stands as a win-win situation. Of course, our ability to integrate into the environments of school-aged youth depends on what direction the field is ready to take with regard to expanding its core roles and values (Blustein, McWhirter and Perry 2005).

Along with offering community organizations assistance in research design and methods, career counselling faculty and graduate students are in an ideal position to contribute to quality programming. According to a meta-analysis of 73 studies of after-school programs that used a control group, Durlak and Weissberg (2007) concluded that youth improve significantly in three major areas: (a) emotional well-being and attitudes, (b) behavioural adjustment, and (c) school performance. They also concluded that gains in academic achievement – which were smaller compared to the other two areas – are more likely to occur if staff are well-trained and regularly supervised, coached, and monitored. By collaborating with program staff, career counselling faculty and students at universities can contribute to the public good (Grubb 2004). Indeed, there is an international consensus that quality is the cornerstone for the achieving academic gains (Sheldon and Hopkins 2008), while justifying the continuation of those services (Plant 2004).

Given that after-school community programmes are typically staffed by part-time workers with little experience in education and child/adolescent care (Dennehy and Noam 2005), career counselors offer important skills for ongoing professional training and consultation. By establishing partnerships between universities and
after-school programmes, common problems in non-profit organizations with recruitment and retention are remedied, as they offer a steady source of qualified personnel (e.g., graduate assistants, service learning students from courses in career development) and professional training (for staff, school teachers, or volunteers). To help change an outside agency, however, scholars must be sustained by a philosophy of training and social activism that is supported by their home institution (Kenny, Sparks and Jackson 2007).

As illustrated in Figure 1, researchers and practitioners can assist programs in creating measurable benchmarks that are consistent with a ‘logic model’ based on theoretical principles. In this example, traditional aspects of adolescent career development are subsumed under the umbrella construct of career preparation (Skorikov 2007), which synergistically interacts with youth mentoring as the other twin engine of change that blends traditional components of youth mentoring with non-traditional components. This interaction harnesses critical consciousness and social support, facilitating school engagement and, in turn, increasing the likelihood of graduating from high school, along with higher academic achievement and better psychological adjustment. Career education programmes are construed as providing self-determination that promotes mediators of school success, chief among them being school engagement, self-efficacy, and an autonomous approach to achieving goals: developmental assets which serve as protective factors commonly associated with positive youth development (Larson 2000).

| Note: Higher education can be viewed as providing the resources, personnel, and expertise for implementing the mechanisms of change and assessing outcomes at the proximal and distal level, including methods of assessing quality programming. |

Figure 1: A schematic model of Change for School-linked Programmes
In Figure 1, notice that safe spaces, which are typically based in schools, are included. By safe spaces I refer to socio-emotional support that targets critical consciousness in relation to thinking about the future by reflecting on past and present narratives, whereby youth can openly discuss how prejudice, stereotypes, and structural barriers are experienced at home, school, and society – without fear of being judged, blamed, and/or ostracized (Weis and Fine 2000). Based on several ethnographic studies, Weis and Centrie (2002, 12) illustrated how safe spaces function as sources of empowerment in two low-income, minority-concentrated schools; as they observed, a safe space is a ‘location where individuals may re-envisioned themselves and engage in self-affirmation and preparation for the future’. Here they allude to safe spaces as a place where ‘students are encouraged to fight back – to write their own scripts in contrast to those of the dominant society about who they are and what they can and should become’ (Weis and Centrie 2002, 33). This non-traditional form of social support fits naturally with the developmental scheme of career preparation that uses counselling-based interventions (Perry 2008; Perry and Vance in press).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in school-based mentoring (SBM), of which safe spaces may in part consist of, to help address the increasing pressures schools face in improving academic performance (Jucovy 2000). Compared to community-based mentoring, SBM has the advantage of reaching out to youth with severe academic, social, and/or behavioral problems: youth who may not otherwise be served in the community. From a research design perspective, another advantage of SBM resides in the fact that it can address self-selection bias. Bodilly and Beckett (2005, xiv) note that most after-school programmes do not consider how youth ‘differ systematically from those who choose not to attend in terms of motivation, aspiration, and other factors’. Without controlling for this confound, statistical differences in outcomes found between participants and non-participants cannot be definitively attributed to a programme.

While the academic focus may be construed as deviating from the traditional purposes of youth mentoring, this speculative concern has not been supported. Studies suggest that the quality of the relationship is no less potent than in community programmes (Herrera 1999; Herrera, Sipe, and McClanahan 2000).

For any approach to prevention, there will be far greater success in meeting its objectives when a program is guided by theoretical principles, has set clear measurable goals, is based on empirical evidence, takes into account culture, and brings together multiple approaches (Hage et al. 2007). Given these needs, moving toward inter-disciplinary collaboration with school-linked programmes is intuitive. In practice, this vision is seldom met without meeting ‘roadblocks’. For example, school teachers might be resistant to career education; in other instances, school administrators may not agree with the approach, or be concerned about conflicting priorities of the school. To address these challenges, I (Perry in press) have proposed a mixed methods, social action approach. Vocational programmes are short-lived when they are not perceived as relevant to the group, if the program is not engaging, and if program staff fail to draw from a community’s existing resources. Process
and outcomes should be integrated through a research approach that values the need for statistical gains without sacrificing the equally paramount issue of fostering mutuality, building relationships, and discovering meanings of various actors.

Naturally, finding a merger between so many constituents, stakeholders, and entities is not an academic exercise that can be neatly applied from one society to the next. Each nation has its own unique, complex set of economic, social, political, and educational issues and stages of development (Watts 1996). Hence, each solution to change and collaboration will inevitably be a local matter, to some extent, that is arrived at and implemented at the grassroots level. My intention is not to be prescriptive, but to provide a usable template of theoretical ideas, lines of research, and guidelines of practice. In the end, identifying long-lasting ways to promote school engagement among secondary school-aged youth, especially those at-risk for school dropout, would substantially reduce individual, social, and economic costs for all nations (Amos 2008).

NOTE

1 Although racial identity has been the most widely studied index of critical consciousness, it should not be viewed as the only developmental path. There are other social identities people use. Given the relationships between low socioeconomic status and low expectations for job success (Galambos and Silbereisen 1987), scholars may consider studying youths’ internalized classism (e.g., messages that poor youth will not go to higher education). Critical consciousness may also be conceptualized in terms of ideologies, such as social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth and Malle 1994), or beliefs concerning poverty and inequity (e.g., Bullock and Limbert 2003).

REFERENCES


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