

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND THE PLANNING AGENDA

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The transition from school to work has become the focus of much thought and debate in the field of education in recent years. The growing emphasis on competency-based training and its implications for current and future planning in NSW schools has developed as a key issue along with the important issues of quality, diversity and relevance of courses and the implications for teaching and school organisation.

Many factors have influenced the post-compulsory phase of the educational process and much thought and discussion has taken place related to the most appropriate means of developing an effective transition from school to the workforce for students in Years 11 and 12. The high growth in retention rates in NSW schools in recent years, has highlighted the need to create a diverse curriculum which caters to the needs of all students, not just those intending to progress to tertiary study. Along with this, the growing demands from industry for students to gain relevant competencies which would equip them for the workforce have impacted on the development of vocationally-oriented course work.

The result of this diversification has been the development of a "pathways" model of schooling which allows students to vary their subject choices and programs of study throughout their senior secondary years, in particular, to lead them towards either full or part-time employment, full or part-time study or training related directly to employment or higher education. Schools have expended a significant component of their resources on the development of vocational education curriculum with links being established directly with the TAFE sector and industry and this emphasis has been reflected and supported by the Commonwealth Government through the development of a "national training agenda". The Australian Vocational Certificate (AVC) training system has emerged as a new Australian system for combining work and training and is an example of the changing emphasis towards varied pathways through the senior years of schooling.

This paper will explore some of the diversity and effects of the "pathways" models offered at the school level by focusing on a current research study being undertaken by the author entitled: "Transitional Education: The effects of vocational education and environmental influences in post-compulsory secondary schooling".

The paper will:

i) provide background to the project by detailing the vocational pathways programs in place in the three sample schools involved in the study;

ii) focus on and discuss preliminary results related to student levels of self-esteem and related program effects;

iii) review these results in the light of in-depth interview data

iv) discuss possible implications for the "pathways" model and the vocational training agenda in post-compulsory schooling.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

SCHOOLS AND COURSE DESIGN

The vocational education courses being examined in the current study are in place in three Catholic secondary schools in the Sydney metropolitan area. The courses will be identified for the purposes of discussion and analysis in this paper as follows:

Course A: Female Single Sex School
Terminating Year 11 Employment Preparation Diploma

Course B: Male Single Sex School
Years 11 and 12 Employment Preparation Course

Course C: Co-educational School
Years 11 and 12 Employment Preparation Course

No hierarchical order is imputed.

Course Information

Course A

This course developed from a "Participation and Equity Report" conducted within the school in 1984. This report recommended that a course be developed which catered for the specific needs of non-academic Year 10 students who were not inclined to proceed to the Higher School Certificate, were unable to gain admission to TAFE or business colleges and who were "too immature or unskilled to enter the workforce". (Price, 1992, p 1). It commenced in 1985 as a terminating Year 11 course attached to the Yrs 7 to 10 secondary school and drew graduating Year 10 students from the host school and surrounding schools. This drawing area expanded as the effectiveness of the course was recognised to encompass the broad metropolitan area.

Course B

This course commenced in 1982 in response to a perceived need by staff of the necessity to meet the specific requirements of students not suited to and/or not interested in pursuing a tertiary career path. In 1981 it was recognised that diversity in the curriculum was essential to cater for retention rates of 50% of students moving into Years 11 and 12. In 1992 this retention figure had grown to approximately 85%,

with the addition of up to 90 extra students from "feeder" schools. This continued rise gave added impetus to the continued development of this specialised course.

Course C

This course commenced in 1991 in response to the high retention rates within the post-compulsory years of schooling and a perceived need by staff to offer a course which would be more relevant to students who were not suited to academic work and who would, in all probability, achieve a very poor TER score in the Higher School Certificate.

Enrolments had varied across the three years of the course implementation with a drop in enrolments occurring in 1992 due to the poor status of the course among students and parents. Staff worked to modify this negative attitude which resulted in increased enrolments in 1993 to encompass 25% of the graduating Year 10 cohort and a higher percentage predicted in 1994.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION COURSES

LOCATION

Courses B and C are integrated within the mainstream Years 11 and 12 students and course work is conducted in general classrooms. Some specialised resources are allocated to specific components of the courses such as mechanics and hospitality training.

Course A was originally set up to function as a separate program attached to, but not within the mainstream school. From 1984 to 1990 the course featured specially dedicated rooms located separately, but within the bounds of the main school. During 1993, the year in which data was gathered, as part of a restructure caused by a loss of facilities and discipline problems within the student cohort, the course had been moved back into the mainstream school buildings, with loss of dedicated rooms and resources.

CONDITIONS

Course A has adopted a "transitional" approach to student conditions. Students are granted employment privileges, such as free movement outside the school at lunch time, and requirements such as completing a "sign on and off" book. Students also wear an employment-style uniform.

Students in Courses B and C wear the same uniform and experience the same conditions as other senior students.

CURRICULUM

All courses offer a curriculum which has an employment orientation with a basic pattern of study consisting of Board of Studies Endorsed and Developed Content courses along with the opportunity to participate in Joint Secondary Schools TAFE courses.

Course A specifically offers an employment orientation with emphasis on office and hospitality skills along with a living skills focus. The curriculum is dynamic in nature and has remained responsive to the changing needs of students and the workplace. Job Search Assistance and skill development are concentrated in the final weeks and continue for students unable to find immediate work.

Course B specifically offers an Employment orientation whilst still working towards a Higher School Certificate and Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER). A variety in pathways is developed through the arrangement of subjects into diverse specialised packages linking school course work with JSST courses in the following areas:

Business, Retail and Commerce; Technology and Design; Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality; Performing and Creative Arts.

Course C specifically offers an employment and life skills orientation with a strong emphasis placed on the levels of success achieved by the students rather than the gaining of employment. Students work towards a Higher School Certificate but not a Tertiary Entrance Rank.

Work Experience

Course A and C include both work experience and community service experience as an integral component of the program. Course

Assessment

Courses A and B conduct internal and ongoing curriculum related assessment tasks. External credentialism is gained for specific study & skills eg. typing

Course C conducts internal assessment for all units with an external assessment component relevant to the six Board Developed Courses. No form of external credentialism is gained, apart from the St. John's Ambulance Certificate.

Contracts are used by Courses A and C as a formalised component of the assessment requirements and as an overall agreement related to expected effort and outcomes.

Duration

Course A: Approximately 10 months in Year 11 - graduation takes place before the influx of Year 12 leavers into the employment market. Post-course job search assistance available for ongoing job seekers.

Courses B and C: Two year program conducted across Years 11 and 12. Students gaining employment in the interim are permitted to leave prior to completion.

Staff

For all courses staff consists of a small team with specialised experience with low achieving students and those with special needs. Courses also feature a specialised co-ordinator responsible for overall administrative and teaching program

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

This project had adopted a three tiered, School (A, B, C) by Course (Experimental, Control) by Time (Pre-test, Post-test) design.

Hypothesis

The main hypothesis to be tested in this research project was as follows:

Students of low academic ability who participate in a vocational education course (employment preparation) in post-compulsory schooling will demonstrate a significant improvement in self-esteem when compared to a matched group of students matched on academic ability, participating in an academic program of study (tertiary preparation).

Sample Group

Students in Year 11 in three separate schools, who had chosen to enrol in either an employment preparation or tertiary preparation course were matched on academic ability. Subjects for the study were randomly selected from those students who had achieved a C level pass in English in the School Certificate. Randomly selected students from the employment preparation course formed the experimental group and randomly selected students from the tertiary preparation group formed the control group.

Measurement Instruments

The SDQ-II Self-Description Questionnaire, designed by Herbert Marsh from the University of Western Sydney was administered to both experimental and control groups in a pre-test and post-test design. The SDQ-II is constructed to measure global and multi-dimensional facets of self-concept, and is a validated measure of the Marsh/Shavelson hierarchical self-concept model which examines general self plus academic, relationship and physical factors.

A further measure was administered at pre and post test to gauge any differences in the development of career path expectations between the two groups. This data will be reported on at a future date.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Pre and Post test data from the SDQ-II self esteem measure was analysed for both the experimental and control groups. A multivariate analysis of variance has revealed that there were no significant effects for COURSE, either as a main effect or in interaction with either SCHOOL or TIME alone or with SCHOOL and TIME together as set out in the table below:

fdfp
COURSE 1.47711, 430.175
COURSE X SCHOOL 0.81622, 860.698
COURSE X TIME 1.15111, 430.349
COURSE X SCHOOL
X TIME 1.07222, 860.393

Factor scores for the group as a whole were calculated on pre-test data and compared to the norm sample factor scores in the SDQ-II measure. The graph below shows a general consistency with the norm sample with differences occurring on the factors of Honesty, general self, verbal and general school.

(Graph inserted on hard copy)

DISCUSSION

The main finding of the research project to date has been that variable of Course had no significant effect on levels of self-esteem in either the control or experimental groups. Therefore the hypothesis has not been proven.

It had been anticipated that students in the experimental group, i.e. students participating in the vocational education program of study, would show improvement in levels of self-esteem after a period of involvement in the course, due to the relevant and stimulating curriculum which develops direct links to future employment and the opportunity to experience success in a curriculum of less demanding academic rigour. It was expected that these students would therefore enjoy a more positive experience of schooling, with resultant improvement in self-esteem, than those students of similar academic ability who participated in the more academically demanding tertiary preparation program of study.

In the 1992-93 State Budget, the State Government funded education, employment and training to the value of almost \$5 billion dollars. An emphasis has emerged for the allocation of these funds to developing new training pathways. One area of development is "the new industry studies syllabus" which "will bring vocational education within the framework of the HSC and tertiary entrance process" ("Shaping Tomorrow Today" pp12). The NSW Strategy for Equity in Education and Training clearly supports this trend and formulates a policy for its implementation. The document states that " currently, the success of a significant number of those in education and training is affected by a range of factors outside their control. But success is also affected by the kind of programs offered, the way in which teaching and training are delivered" (A Strategy for Equity in Education and Training in NSW pp 1).

There is a general feeling and "hype" surrounding the current initiatives related to education and training which implies that it is possible to improve not only the skills, but also attitudes and motivation of students in post-compulsory schooling, by finding the "right" mix of curriculum. Policy documents view the development of diversity in pathways of learning as the key to helping "young people between the ages of 15 to 19 reach their full potential" ('Directions' pp 2). The findings, to date, in this current research project indicate that, whilst the content, character and delivery of courses are key elements in their effectiveness, the course does not have a significant effect on self-esteem levels. The importance of the curriculum or course must therefore be evaluated in conjunction with other relevant factors, if educational aims related to development of student potential and equity in vocational education are to be achieved.

OTHER FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED

Some important factors which emerged from both statistical and in-depth interview data were:

The Culture and Nature of the School.

In the current study the variable of "school" was the only variable which emerged from a multi-variate analysis of variance to be of significance in relation to the sub-scales of the SDQ-II self-esteem measure. These results will be fully discussed after more in-depth analysis is completed. The nature of the school and the status of the respective courses of study emerged as important factors during

interviews with randomly selected students.

Parental Expectations

The influence of parental expectations emerged from in-depth interview analysis as a significant factor in students' choice in relation to both pathways of study chosen and subjects within particular programs. Many students, particularly in the Tertiary Preparation Course, indicated that parents held high expectations of their progress and expected them to complete the Higher School Certificate.

Student Perceptions

The majority of students interviewed expressed confidence in their future whether it be related to finding employment or further education and training. It was surprising that some students within the Employment Preparation course and the majority of students within the Tertiary Preparation course expressed the desire to pursue a tertiary career, ie. a university course and viewed TAFE as a possible second choice. It appears evident that, based on past academic performances and levels of achievement, these students would have difficulty in both achieving tertiary entrance and then coping with the academic rigour. Many students and their parents seem to have adopted the belief that completion of Years 11 and 12 will lead to higher education of some sort, irrespective of academic ability. This belief, coupled with cultural influences and the desire for students to receive the best education possible, coupled with government pressure for students to be retained into Years 11 and 12 appears to have created an unrealistic expectation for post-compulsory schooling for low academic achievers.

CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the current research project by providing background information related to schools and specific courses of study; focussed on preliminary results related to self-esteem; reviewed the results in the light of interview data and discussed possible implications for the vocational training agenda.

The results analysed to date from this research project have revealed that for the entire sample group of students , the course of study

undertaken in post-compulsory schooling has not had a significant effect on levels of self-esteem. Therefore, the experience of schooling gained by students of low academic ability in the employment preparation courses, has not had a more positive effect on levels of self-esteem than the experience of schooling gained by low academic achievers in the more rigorously academic tertiary preparation courses.

This result has important significance for the designers of vocational programs, as it highlights the need for the nature of the course and method of delivery to be considered in the light of more complex factors such as the nature and culture of the school, parental expectations and student perceptions of the "pathways model". These issues will be the subject of further analysis throughout this research project along with the issue of the outcomes of vocational education in relation to the development of key competencies and career path expectations.

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