

Career-related teacher support

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**Career-related teacher support: A review of roles that teachers play
in supporting students' career planning**

Abstract

Preparing adolescents for transitioning from school to work has become a priority across all developed countries due to the increasingly difficult labor market conditions and changes related to technological advances. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional uncertainties in the world of work. This article reviews the concept of career-related teacher support (CRTS) and illustrates the different roles that school teachers can have in influencing students' career planning and decision making. The information should be beneficial to teachers, counselors, researchers, and policy-makers seeking to optimize school-based career guidance and counseling practices. Brief suggestions are also provided for future research and practice.

Keywords: career counseling, career guidance, secondary schools, social support, teacher support

Introduction

Current research literature addressing the topic of general support (academic, social, emotional) provided for students clearly documents a close relationship between support from significant others (parents, teachers, mentors) and students' acquisition of self-efficacy (Lent et al., 2000; Lent et al., 2019). For example, empirical studies have found that support offered by teachers is instrumental in reinforcing students' academic self-efficacy (Song et al., 2015), behavioral self-management (Wentzel et al., 2018) and emotional control and resilience (Pitzer & Skinner, 2016). These aspects of self-efficacy are particularly relevant not only for successful passage through school but also, in the senior school years, for successfully planning a career path.

This paper begins by providing background information on why support from teachers is increasingly important for students who are facing a constantly changing and challenging future, particularly in the domain of employment after leaving school. Reference is then made to previous research that has explored outcomes from general academic, emotional and social support that all teachers provide for their students. Limitations evident in the guidance and support currently provided in many secondary schools are identified and discussed. Career-related teacher support (CRTS) is then defined, and its importance for assisting students in making career path and study route decisions. The argument is made that such support could be improved if better use is made of data that indicate the characteristics of the most effective career-related support. To obtain a clear idea of these characteristics, results from a review of 19 relevant studies are then presented. Finally, the paper briefly suggests directions for further research and identifies implications for teacher education.

Defining support from teachers

The concept of 'general teacher support' has been studied under many different categorizations (e.g. classroom belonging, student guidance, individual counseling, pastoral care, pedagogical caring, relatedness). All these labels basically refer to the same notion that teacher support operates via

intellectual and emotional bonds that exist between students and teachers (Davis, 2003; Pringle et al., 2019).

Based on a meta-analysis by Lei et al. (2018), teacher support can be studied under two frameworks—promoting self-determination, and providing social support. According to the work of Ryan and Deci (2000), self-determination framework sees teacher support as assisting students to develop autonomy in planning and decision making, and in increasing their intrinsic motivation. Teacher's support for student autonomy drives intrinsic motivation so that individuals aspire to engage successfully in achieving their goals in life. Alternatively, under the social support framework, based on the work of Tardy (1985), teacher support comprises more general ongoing encouragement, supportive advice, feedback and action that all teachers can and should provide in any context.

Previous studies have found that teachers' social support for their students is highly correlated with positive development in academic performance, motivation, school engagement, school behavior, and career exploration (job-search behavior) (Creed et al., 2006; Creed et al., 2009; Lent et al., 2019; Quin et al., 2018; Rogers & Creed, 2011; Rogers et al., 2008; Rosenfeld et al., 2000) and with the acquisition of cooperative behaviors (Chiu & Chow, 2011; Ryan & Shim, 2012; Sun & Shek, 2012). The benefit of teacher social support is well illustrated in a meta-analysis of 61 longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that identified a medium to strong positive correlation between teacher-student relationship and school engagement (Roorda et al., 2011).

In respect of teacher support for social and emotional development, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973) has long led us to believe that a supportive context is essential for young children's normal development. Based on this assumption, a supportive teacher-student relationship later in school is crucial for students' emotional security and confidence. This security helps them cope with everyday demands within a school environment and to engage positively with learning (Weyns et al., 2018). It is therefore not surprising that effective teacher support is associated with higher achievement, positive attitudes to

learning, stronger engagement in learning—and may also be associated later with positive career development outcomes (Burns et al., 2019; Metheny et al., 2008; Miklikowska et al., 2019; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Current problems in school-based career guidance and education

School leavers today are facing a more difficult situation than ever, because rapid advances in technology have meant that knowledge and skills traditionally taught in school may not relate adequately to the job opportunities of the immediate future (Hirschi, 2018; Perry et al., 2010; Skorikov, 2007; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018). As cautioned by World Economic Forum (2018), progressive adoption of automation technologies may result in loss of an estimated 75 million existing jobs. At the international level, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have called for all schools to enhance their curriculum and support services to facilitate students' transition from school to a constantly evolving world of work (UNESCO, 2012, 2015, 2016). To achieve this goal, policy-makers worldwide will need to prioritize career guidance practices in schools and explore how teachers can better prepare their students for the future (OECD, 2004, 2011, 2018). It has become increasingly apparent that all secondary schools need to provide students with appropriate career guidance and counseling to assist them in making informed decisions on a study path and occupational choices (Watts, 2013)—and many schools are now doing so. However, the quality and effectiveness of career counseling and guidance services vary widely across schools and systems (Loft et al., 2020; OECD, 2004; 2011). It is vital that the personnel responsible for providing such support are well qualified and possess the appropriate expertise. In Australia and the United States, rigorous career practitioner credentialing and licensure systems are already in place, but this is not necessarily the case in other locations. One example is Hong Kong, where local authorities are only now working hard to raise the level of qualifications of general classroom teachers to perform career guidance and counseling work (Wong & Yuen, 2019).

A global survey, with more than 40,000 young people across 150 countries, found that 31% stated that the education they currently receive in school could not prepare them for the workplace (UNESCO, 2020; WorldSkills & OECD, 2019). In Australia for example, experts have made recommendations with regard to how career guidance and counseling in Australian schools could be fine-tuned, so that the problems could be alleviated (Australian Government, 2019; Gallriott et al., 2015; McMahon et al., 2000). However, in reality Australia is still experiencing difficulties in helping youth transition from school to work. Many of these young people know that they will experience problems when transitioning, yet they seem reluctant to participate willingly in any school-based programs that are available (Gallriott & Graham, 2015). This appears to be due to career guidance programs often beginning too late, or not meeting the needs and expectations of students or employers (Keele et al., 2020).

The same situation has been observed in Hong Kong (Shek et al., 2020). A study in 2019 surveyed more than 700 young people and their teachers from 103 secondary schools. Findings revealed that despite heavy government support in curriculum development and financial resources (in the form of a “Career and Life Planning Grant”), up to 30% of students opined that their schools still did little to encourage their career planning or expose them to various employment-related pathways and opportunities (Federation of Youth Groups, 2019; Wong & Yuen, 2019).

Based on findings from these studies, there is clearly a need to strengthen teacher support and to improve career guidance activities. The starting point must be to examine more closely the exact nature of effective career-related teacher support (as defined below) by analyzing data from studies that have been completed.

Defining career-related teacher support

A narrow definition of career-related teacher support is that it is anything a teacher does that can facilitate the career planning of students. This specific form of support includes helping students investigate possible career paths, helping them identify their abilities and interests, providing current information on

employment options, and supporting and encouraging individuals in setting their goals and working towards them. Zhang et al. (2018) reviewed extant research to identify features of teacher support that appear to influence students' career decision-making. Their review examined 18 published quantitative studies from reputable journals that had explored career decision-making in middle school and high school students. They also identified theories that had underpinned each study. It was found that the design and interpretation of these studies tended to be influenced most by Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 2000), Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2019), Self-determination Theory (Deci, 2009) and Vocational Self-concept Theory (Super, 1957, 1980, 1990).

A major limitation of the review by Zhang et al. (2018) is that it only drew upon two databases and did not include qualitative studies or methodological papers. The reviewers also failed to identify the precise strategies that teachers use to facilitate career development of students. It is clear that the more we can discover of what teachers actually do to assist students' successful career planning and development, the better the quality of career support in schools can become. In their review, Zhang et al. (2018) merely concluded that CRTS is implemented in two forms, "general" support and "specific" support, and may be described as "instrumental" or "emotional". General support refers to the way in which teachers show positive regard and expectations while helping their students daily to cope with activities related to academic work, extra-curricular pursuits, and any personal matters. Specific support is targeted at areas such as career planning, goal setting, study planning, and work-experience placements. Instrumental and emotional forms of support are both essential to students' overall career development, particularly when students are confused over making important decisions. However, the specific roles performed by teachers in providing career guidance in school settings and how these types of supports could be administered were not clearly delineated. Also, as suggested by Tardy (1985)'s typology, clearly there are other forms of teacher support in addition to instrumental or emotional support. The classification of the nature and types of teacher support, therefore, could be more refined.

Zhang et al. (2018) also discovered that the work of Metheny et al. (2008) tends to be the most cited publication concerning CRTS. According to Metheny et al. (2008), factor analyzes suggest that CRTS has four traits as supported by high factor loadings—namely, invested effort (.88), positive regard (.83), positive expectations (.89) and accessibility (.82). “Invested” refers to teachers being genuinely willing to be engaged in behaviors that contribute to future success of their students. “Positive regard” refers to teachers being emotionally connected to their students and genuinely caring for students’ needs. “Expectations” refers to teachers communicating their positive expectations on students’ future educational and vocational success. “Accessibility” relates to teachers being perceived by students as willing and readily available to attend to their needs when they seek information or support.

Relationship between teacher support and students’ career development

During the adolescent stage, teachers play a major role in directly influencing the development of students’ career aspirations, future orientation, career exploration, and planning (Alm et al., 2019; Hirschi et al., 2011; Rogers & Creed, 2011; Smylie & Smart, 1990). Empirical studies have found multiple therapeutic effects that teacher support can have on students’ career planning and development. These include development of positive career aspirations (Ali & McWhirter, 2006), career self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Gushue & Whitson, 2006), educational expectations (McWhirter et al., 1998) and school-related interest and goal orientations (Wentzel, 1998). Later benefits include readiness for career adaptability (Atac et al., 2018; Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005) and students anticipating fewer educational barriers or career barriers (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; McWhirter et al., 1998) and less attachment anxiety and distress (Luzzo et al., 1999; Vogel & Wei, 2005). In short, a major beneficial effect of CRTS is that it enhances students’ positive schooling experience and maximizes their engagement in learning, which in turn enhances options for career planning (Lapan, 2004).

Given the importance of teachers’ career-related support (CRTS), a targeted review of this domain would be of benefit to improve career guidance and counseling practices at both group and

individual levels (Zhang et al., 2020). The review of literature below draws on available studies to provide an overview of CRTS, with particular reference to supporting students' career development.

Method

This review does not claim to be exhaustive—rather it set out to bring together concepts and processes embodied in career-related support to provide an overview. A merit of this approach is that it focuses on surveying literature and highlighting the current knowledge-base for the subject under review (Grant & Booth, 2009).

Literature search

The authors relied on performing key word searches on major research databases (EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, Psych INFO, Science Direct, Springer Link), online academic search engines (Digital Dissertation Consortium, Google Scholar), and publishers' websites (Emerald, SAGE, Routledge). The identified articles, papers and reports were then downloaded from the Internet and supplemented by other relevant materials identified through the personal knowledge of the researchers, and from input from expert informants.

Several relevant keyword combinations in English were used when searches were performed (teacher support, teacher support career, career teacher support, teacher social support career, support teacher career). In addition, analyses were also conducted using relevant bibliographies and reference lists of academic books, published papers and theses. In particular, searches were conducted in key career development and counseling psychology journals such as *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*, *Career Development International*, *Career Development Quarterly*, *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Career Assessment*, *Journal of Career Development*, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *Journal of Asia Pacific*

Counseling, Journal of Guidance & Counseling, Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools, Journal of Vocational Behavior, and Journal of Youth & Adolescence.

Literature inclusion criteria

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: 1) addressed the relationship between teacher support and students' career development; 2) measured teacher support and its effect; 3) measured teacher support against any of the keywords listed above; 4) provided theoretical and methodological frameworks containing any of the keyword. Excluded from analysis were non-peer reviewed articles or papers. It was found that 49 articles met these criteria; and after close inspection, 19 articles with content most closely relevant to the topic were finally selected for further analysis. The studies used in the detailed review are indicated clearly by * in the reference list.

Data analysis and synthesis

The procedure adopted for analysis applied a typology that could be used to group different themes. The typology was based on the work of McWhirter et al., (1998) and Metheny et al., (2008) (Table 1). The major reason for adopting this typology was that it had proved to be of value in these previous studies that measured and validated CRTS using factor analysis.

The selected articles were read several times by the researchers, who then discussed provisional categories and themes that had emerged. After further discussion, some categories were then combined with others to avoid repetition or ambiguity. When consensus was reached, each main theme was given a provisional label and underwent checking by an experienced career guidance teacher (with 20 years of service) from the secondary school sector in Hong Kong. Feedback from this teacher resulted in a few minor revisions to the labels attached to some themes.

The themes generated corresponded to the four major traits of CRTS proposed by Metheny et al. (2008) —namely: 1) invested, 2) positive regard, 3) expectations, and 4) accessibility. Specifically, the match is highlighted in Table 1.

[Table 1]

Results

Teachers' as invested care-givers

The role of any teacher must always involve giving due care and attention to the students in their classes. Teacher support can be examined from the perspective of students and how they perceive teachers' supportive influence has affected them. In a study involving 282 female Mexican American high school students (McWhirter et al., 1998), teacher support was treated as a situational variable and was measured with a subscale assessing students' perception of their teachers' interest in them as people and the degree of support they gave for academic achievement and future plans. The influence of teacher support was found to be significantly and positively correlated with the students' level of career commitment. It was also found that higher levels of support were associated with students perceiving fewer barriers to their educational and occupational futures.

This line of research has explored how teachers can perform the role of expert care-givers to address their students' developmental needs, while at the same time taking into account their different backgrounds and abilities. In particular, this line of research has looked at how students with special educational needs should be supported (Chan et al., 2018). The focus has been on identifying the most appropriate forms of care that will ultimately help students with learning difficulties (and others) obtain and keep employment (Biller & Horn, 1991; Hutchinson, 1995).

Dick and Rallis (1991) developed a ‘model of career choice’, based on a hypothesis that students’ career choices are influenced by their beliefs about intrinsic factors (e.g., intellectual ability required for the job; does it suit my personal interest) and extrinsic factors (e.g., cost of acquiring the qualification; availability of the job). These beliefs are acquired through experiences related to academic achievement (grades) and the attitudes and expectations of significant others, such as teachers and counselors referred to as “socializers”. Socializers play a crucial role in students’ career choices by influencing how a student reflects upon and interprets their personal experiences. These influences then shape their self-efficacy beliefs, expectations, and values—and ultimately their career choice.

Teachers’ role in fostering students’ self-efficacy

Teachers undoubtedly act as role models for their students, whether consciously or not, and this can influence development of students’ attitudes, motivation, and beliefs about themselves (self-efficacy). The concept of self-efficacy pertains to an individual’s belief in their own ability to apply themselves successfully to achieve a desired outcome. Not surprisingly, teachers are sources of information that can strengthen a student’s self-efficacy beliefs (or can destroy them) through the nature of the feedback and encouragement they give. Teachers are seen as active agents in helping students strengthen self-efficacy beliefs, which ultimately can influence their career planning and decision making. This view was supported in a study with undergraduate students where the results indicated that self-efficacy contributed significantly to their perceived range of possible career options (Lent et al., 1986).

Several scholars have applied social cognitive theory to examine a variety of direct and indirect teacher inputs and influences that may facilitate adolescent career development. One line of research has looked at how teachers influence adolescent career decision-making through role modeling (vicarious learning) (Betz, 1994). According to Basow and Howe (1980) a role model is a person whose life and activities influence another person in some way. Bandura (1986) hypothesized that people develop self-efficacy beliefs by observing and comparing themselves with others (vicarious experience) and by

listening and talking to others (verbal persuasion and influence). It has been suggested that role-models can, for example, influence an individual's decision to enter a particular career (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Byars-Winston et al., 2017; Nauta et al., 1998).

The formation of self-efficacy belief is closely associated with formation of vocational interests—a person tends to become increasingly interested in pursuits in which they find themselves competent. Lent et al. (2000) proposed that self-efficacy plays a central role in strengthening interest development; and if an interest can lead ultimately to a career path it may influence a person's goal setting and actions. Previous research found that interests arise largely through access to opportunities and accompanying support (Betz, 1994). Within a school setting, opportunities need to be provided for students to experience new fields of study and develop new interests (for example, in science or technology or business), and teachers should assist students in identifying their strengths and vocational interests as a component in any career counseling (Betz et al., 1996). Teacher support may thus be one of the most important relational processes in the course of a student's career development (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2012; Michaeli et al., 2016).

Teachers as a source of positive career expectations

Motivating students is an obvious role that all teachers undertake every day, and this was recognized by Farmer (1985) as important also for career development. Her model of career commitment and aspiration was derived from the work of Super (1980) on career motivation. It was hypothesized that significant others in a person's environment, in particular teachers, are central to a person's achievement motivation and career planning. In the first research application of the model, it was found that although career-related teacher support was a predictor of career aspiration and career motivation, it was less significant than career-related parental support. A subsequent application of the model attempted to verify this observation but found parental support and teacher support were both important in promoting persistence in pursuing a career option (Farmer et al., 1995).

Teachers as resource persons available for support and information

This line of research sees social support (which includes CRTS) as one of the resources students can utilize to construct their own career path. The process of career development thus involves an individual making use of various psychological capital and social resources that enable him or her to set goals and plan a career path (Rottinghaus et al., 2012).

Based on the career resources model proposed by Hirschi (2012), social support is classified as a form of resource available for all to use. Students naturally tend to view their teachers as a resource they can call upon in times of need. Teachers are seen to possess a work history and life experience that gives them credibility when offering sound advice and helping to solve problems. Findings from a study by McWhirter et al. (1998) indicated that from the students' perspective, what was valued most was teachers' *instrumental* support (advice, direct guidance, information). Given the influence that teacher support can have on an individual's career development, teachers should ensure that they are well informed to provide accurate and up-to-date information that can positively assist students in making career choices (Edwards & Quinter, 2011). This supply of information, together with teacher's evaluative feedback, is essential to the formation of students' vocational self-concept (VSC). VSC is a psychological construct regarded as part of a person's overall self-concept (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2012; Holland, 1981; Leung, 1999; Savickas, 2019). This dimension evolves throughout the lifespan, from an aggregate of a person's life experiences. A young child has no realistic concept of self in relation to future vocation; but as he or she becomes more mature, different life experiences and feedback from parents and teachers will orient the adolescent towards a working life ahead. They will begin to visualize themselves as later having a career, and at that stage, making a career choice will become a motivating force.

The support that teachers give to individuals at this time is associated with that person's better awareness of future occupational roles and the development of a vocational identity (Savickas, 2019). When adolescents and school leavers have a poorly developed VSC, this can contribute to lack of

cohesive career preferences (Zhu et al., 2019) and negative psychological outcomes (Blokker et al., 2019). The presence or absence of VSC in a particular student is something that all career teachers and counselors should detect, because when it is weak or absent this indicates a priority goal that needs to be set for that individual.

Conclusion and future directions for research and practice

This paper has reaffirmed the key dimensions of career-related teacher support, and has highlighted the roles teachers play to aid students' career development. The main conclusion that can be reached is that CRTS can promote students' career planning and produce positive psychological outcomes. At the practice level, it is essential that teachers keep abreast of the latest developments in the world of work—for example, the fields in which employment opportunities are emerging and the knowledge and skills they require; and equally important, awareness of occupations that are becoming redundant due to technology. **This will enable teachers to match their support to the needs of their students in the real world. For teachers who have yet to receive training in career guidance, they should make appropriate referrals of students to the career guidance practitioner in a school who is more qualified to provide career advice.**

It is also important that all teachers-in-training, and particularly those with specific responsibilities in career guidance, should be made fully aware of these important roles they can and should undertake in secondary schools. Much more attention than is typically found in most training courses needs to be devoted to this topic of career support. Currently, teacher training tends to cover only *general* teacher support that is relevant for academic, emotional and social issues. Supporting students' career planning needs to be given greater prominence.

Future research could usefully investigate the CRTS by considering the differential effect this support may have according to students' gender, socio-economic background, cultural characteristics, ability or disability, and educational level. The model proposed by Zhang et al. (2018) could be applied to investigate differences in the type and effects of CRTS with particular groups of students. Possessing this

information could result in differentiated delivery of support to different student populations to assist their career planning and the development of autonomy. For example, while all students require general academic, social and emotional support from their teachers, the specific career-related support needed by gifted and talented students is likely to be different from that required by students with a disability. This knowledge is of potential value when designing the most effective school-based career support for students in inclusive schools.

Further research could also explore the role of CRTS for students in different geographic and cultural environments, such as Asia or Africa, to contribute to the data already published from Western populations. The question would be, are the support dimensions of invested effort, positive regard, positive expectations, and accessibility equally relevant in other cultures?

Also worthy of investigation is the role CRTS plays in mediating the effects of other influences on career development. This could include how teacher support strengthens a student's resilience and adaptability when faced with obstacles along the chosen career path (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014). Specifically, future research can attempt to answer the question of 'What types of support from teachers are most effective in building resilience and persistence?' Findings from all these possible lines of research can be used to aid teachers and counselors in strengthening their supportive practices. The information will also have implications for pre-service teacher education because it is increasingly important that beginning teachers recognize the importance of the support they provide for their students.

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