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How do Career Interventions Impact the Educational Choices of Eighth Grade Students?

Peterson, G.W., Long, K.L., & Billups, A. (1999). The effect of three career interventions on the educational choices of eighth grade students. *Professional School Counseling*, 3(1), 34-42.

Achievement in high school math and science courses is a prerequisite for success in many of the technological fields that exist today. Many eighth grade students do not have knowledge or understanding of how their high school course selection choices impact their ability to achieve future plans. Preparation of eighth grade students prior to their registration for ninth grade classes may impact the decisions students make regarding the courses they select throughout their high school years. These choices in turn will impact students' abilities to appropriately plan for their futures, including their abilities to attain goals in post-secondary educational settings.

Peterson, Long, & Billups (1999) investigated the impact of three types of career interventions on the educational choices of eighth grade students as they prepared for their transition into high school. They specifically looked at how the career interventions influenced the choices students made related to high school course selection and students' understanding of the impact of these choices.

Method

Data was collected from an eighth grade class (n=68) in a developmental research school in a large southeastern public university. The students in the research school were stratified based on race and SES to reflect the demographic characteristics of the state. The students were divided into three groups and were presented with a different level of career intervention. Level 1 was considered the control group. An announcement was made to these students by the guidance counselor during a social studies class that they would be registering for classes in one week. They were asked to prepare for this by completing a Four-Year Trial Program of Study Form during the week. The level 2 group was given the same announcement but was also given printed handouts with information about the school and state graduation requirements, a description of the elective courses that were offered at the school and an example of both a college preparatory and vocational curriculum. They were asked to review these materials during the week prior to registration. The level 3 group was presented with a four-day classroom intervention that included the administration of several inventories by the guidance counselor as well as computer and small group work to enhance students' problem-solving and decision-making skills, self-knowledge, and overall understanding related to career interests in the context of their educational choices during the high school years.

Subsequent to the intervention, each student completed a Career Grid to measure their career interest preferences and to help them to understand the relationship between educational attainment and career opportunities. The grid included information about various

types of work and the educational requirements for each job. Students were also asked to complete a Four-Year Trial Plan of Studies Form. This included having students list four core classes and two electives they planned to take for each semester grades 9-12. Evaluation of students' selections of math and science courses was completed with the use of four performance criteria: completeness, specificity, appropriateness, and sequence. These criteria were used to assess the understanding students had acquired about the relationship between their personal vocational interests and the subsequent educational requirements that would help them to achieve their goals.

Findings

The authors found that the level of career intervention administered to students had a direct impact upon students' abilities to understand the importance of their educational choices related to post-secondary education and future career choices. The students who had the level 3 intensive, four-day intervention were most able to make wise and informed decisions related to their course selections based on a multi-step process that allowed them to look at various careers and the educational criteria related to these careers. The students in the level 2 intervention were also able to demonstrate significantly higher levels of understanding about the relationship between course selection and career aspirations than the level 1 group. This group was simply given some complete printed materials and asked to review them before course registration. The students' abilities to successfully complete their Four-Year Plan of Study Forms in conjunction with their occupational goals was much higher for the level 2 group than for the level 1 group.

Implications

There is a significant achievement gap that continues to exist between White students and students of color, especially in the areas of math and science. All students should be encouraged to access higher levels of learning. It appears that many eighth grade students have very little understanding of how their high school course selections will impact their future abilities to attend post-secondary institutions and to achieve career goals. Additionally, many schools have "high stakes" testing requirements that become the focus of much time and energy within the school system. **This study supports the idea that school counselors are in a position which allows them to help students achieve higher levels of education based on the information and support that is offered to students related to course selection. It appears that the implementation of classroom career intervention by the school counselor has the potential to help students start thinking about the importance of the choices they will be making related to their course selections and how these choices will impact on the rest of their lives.**

Critical Perspective

The biggest limitation of this study is related to the sample population of students and the generalizability of these results to other eighth grade students. The students in this study attended a research school that was part of a larger institution. The sample size was relatively small, with the three cohort groups based on the three classrooms of eighth graders

who attended the school. Though the sample population was representative of the general population of the area based on ethnicity and SES, the students in a research school setting may not be representative of those in other public school settings. The resulting data in this study also was not disaggregated by ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Additionally, there are problems with each of the three levels of intervention. The level 3 intervention involved a significant amount of time and money to implement. This factor may make this intervention an unrealistic option for most schools, regardless of the possible benefits that could be gained by implementing it. The level 2 intervention worked very well for this sample group but required that students review a large amount of printed material. If parental lack of involvement with student learning is a significant issue, then it seems possible that students may not take the time to review the material that is given to them. If this is the case, then the results of the level 2 intervention might not be any different from the results of level 1 intervention, which was the control group. It would also be interesting to follow these students through high school to see what courses they actually took, and how closely this matched their Four-Year Plan of Study Forms.

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