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Suzanne A. Dorsey

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Do students have the necessary information to make career choices?

Expanding career awareness for rural students

By Suzanne A. Dorsey

Our world is in a constant state of change. The advent of modern technology has altered the world of work dramatically. Jobs that were once considered vital are daily becoming obsolete, with jobs that have not been invented yet becoming the key to the future. Because the world of work is constantly changing and the numbers and kinds of occupations are becoming more varied, career awareness is becoming an increasingly critical element of the curriculum. The increased complexity of our society with the subsequent specialization of occupations has produced an almost incomprehensible array of vocations which, in turn, has made the process of career choice a difficult one even for students who have considerable knowledge about job clusters and unique occupations. What, however, of those students who have limited or no knowledge of the world of work other than the jobs available in their local communities? Do these students have the necessary information to make career choices? Does the educational system have a responsibility to teach career awareness; and if it does, how should it be taught?

It has been shown that the most effective way to learn about occupations is through personal or direct contact (Resnick and Smith, 1979; Wehrly, 1973). According to social learning theory, modeling is one of the most effective methods of learning. Modeling can occur simply by observation even if there is no direct reinforcement for

learning or overt practice of what was modeled. In the days of extended families, children were able to have direct contact with a variety of occupational role models. Now, that the numbers and kinds of occupations have increased tremendously, direct or personal contact is limited partly because of the increasing number of one-parent families (Resnick and Smith, 41).

Typically, rural students do not have the opportunity to become acquainted with as many kinds of occupations as do urban students. In rural communities where there is no nearby industrialization, and where the sole commodity of the area may be wheat or cattle, the numbers and kinds of jobs are definitely restricted.

Rich (1979) conducted a study of the extent to which rural students may be handicapped by limited occupational knowledge. She assumed that knowledge of occupations is a prerequisite for occupational aspiration and career choice and hypothesized that rural students, because of their limited occupational knowledge, were prevented from making as diverse and optimal career choices as their urban counterparts (Rich, 320). She also demonstrated that rural students needed to be given information about nonlocal occupations to have equal opportunity to make better and different career choices (Rich, 325).

Expanded career awareness, then, is a must for students residing in rural, isolated communities. Because of isolation and the lack of varied occupational role models, career awareness is limited. The problem becomes how to expand the career awareness of rural youth. The research literature offers few methods and suggestions directly related to rural situations; however, there are steps which can be taken.

Career guidance

The major step in expanding career awareness in rural schools should be to provide competent guidance and counseling services with strong emphasis in career education, and since research has shown that elementary children begin to effectively assimilate career information about the fourth grade, such services need to extend into the elementary grades (Parks, 1976; Resnick and Smith, 1979; Wehrly, 1973).

An adequate career guidance service might well include the following activities:

1) Develop an attractive, easily accessible corner of the library or other widely used room where career information can be housed. Here a vertical file of magazine articles, reprints, free career information from industry and government can be made available for student use. Teachers, especially those with special programs such as Title I reading and math development, can be encouraged to assign activities that will necessitate student use of this career information resource.

2) Make a collection of college materials and display them for student use. One might place these advertisements in conspicuous places on the walls in the halls. Some of these are quite colorful and have cards students can send in to obtain more information. Have a bulletin board on each floor of the high school in the hall and in the elementary school hall displaying career information. There are also free colorful and unique signs about careers that can be ordered through the Occupational Outlook Quarterly.

3) Take advantage of college recruiters. Solicit student feedback about these presentations either verbally or through the use of an evaluation form for students to fill out. Keep track of colleges which have the best presentations and then encourage more students to attend these presentations the next time they are scheduled. Contact colleges whose presentations are weak and give them ideas for future visits. Make a list of things students want to know and questions they ask and prepare recruiters in advance. Encourage students to shop around and attend several college presentations. Do not limit attendance to "just seniors." By the senior year students should have their plans made. The senior year is hectic enough with college entrance examinations, financial aid forms, college application forms, and all the other physical and emotional and academic preparations that must be made by students who know where they are going. Students who are undecided may be lost in all this preparation.

4) Encourage students to apply for several different types of scholarships. Many scholarships are no longer based on grades alone. Take the time to personally contact the scholarship and financial aid office at the colleges students plan to attend. Personal letters from the school counselor or phone calls concerning students help make the student known to college personnel.

5) Start a career night or day program. Information from college admissions offices can often be useful in establishing such programs. Contact technical and trade schools and ask them to visit the school. Many of these schools will tour rural areas only upon invitation. The Bell and Howell Institute, for example, has an excellent presentation dealing with future technology which motivates students in career planning.

6) Try to visit with each student grades 8-12 at least once during the school year about career plans. Make high school students a calendar of career planning that gives them steps they must follow and activities to check off yearly from grade 9 to grade 12 in their own personal career planning. Visit elementary classrooms and develop ways to introduce career information. There are several publications that students should be acquainted with such as the College Handbook and the Index of College Majors. The Occupational Outlook Quarterly should also be made available to students. Once the counselor has oriented students to available materials, they will usually search out the information they need.

7) Acquaint teachers with the National Center for Career Education. NCCE is located on the University of Montana campus in Missoula, Montana, and has a set of career oriented curriculum materials for grades 1-12 which can be used by classroom teachers in the course of regular instruction to expand and develop career awareness. These ideas and programs have been gathered from all over the United States and are proven methods. The entire set costs about \$600 which covers the cost of reprinting. In addition, the NCCE has a national information retrieval system and can do computer searches for career programs and materials at a minimal cost.

8) Seek out computerized career information systems which are being established in many states. An example is Project View, a career information system offered through the Office of Public Instruction, State of Montana, to all school districts in the state. A microfiche reader with a set of microfiche cards listing specific occupational descriptions and information for all colleges in the state of Montana are available free to every school district. The cards are classified according to the D.O.T. and are constantly updated. These services usually charge districts the price of computer terminal time; however, rural school districts could go together for the cost of this service, or perhaps seek outside funding through the Career Education Incentive Act or Title IV and incorporate the cost of the service into a career education program.

9) Involve the local community in promoting career awareness. Even rural areas host a certain number and type of nonfarm occupations such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, bankers, accountants, government workers and others. These people should be involved in career education programs either by bringing them into the school to speak to interested students, or by setting up a work-study program whereby interested students are allowed released time from school to work with these professionals as part of their school activity. Caution must be exercised in setting up this type of program so that it is not abused. The purpose should be to give students an opportunity for career experiences they could not have otherwise. Pumping gas and working as a car hop at the local drive-in would not be considered options in this type of program. These jobs students can obtain readily; the school work-study program should focus on career experiences that would not otherwise occur until after a college education, or technical training, or in a nonrural area business with on-the-job training.

10) Establish an effective student assessment system. From the time school starts in August, the counselor should begin to inform students about the ACT and the SAT and their respective testing dates and deadlines. Students should know which one they need to take and why.

Interest inventories such as the Kuder and the Strong-Campbell should also be made available to students. The Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory (SCII) is especially good for juniors and seniors. In the junior year the Army offers the administration of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) at no cost to interested students. The ASVAB provides students some insight into their abilities, both academic and trade technical. For the junior high age student the Differential Aptitude Test (DAT) may be used. Although somewhat time consuming, it also can be used to help the student understand personal abilities and limitations. It should be axiomatic that if any tests or inventories are employed, it is essential that the counselor interpret and explain the results to the students individually. Test scores are of no value if no one understands what they mean and if they are not used.

These are some possibilities that have been used and/or could be used to expand career awareness in rural student populations. A creative counselor can develop many more. Career education is a must for rural students

because limited career awareness handicaps rural youth in career choice. Having a limited spectrum of occupations from which to choose is costly to the nation as well as to the individual student. Future leaders, statesmen, lawyers, doctors, scientists, and many other talented individuals who could contribute much to society can be found in rural areas as well as urban centers and rural school districts cannot afford to afford career

education programs. Much can be done without extensive financial demands if qualified, competent counselors are available for a significant amount of time, especially when other school personnel and community members work together. However, regardless of cost, the future will require well qualified people and rural youth must be prepared to accept their place in the job market of tomorrow. We need their potential.

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