
Career Support Needs of Youth: A Qualitative Analysis of the Rural Perspective

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Abstract

This study details needs identified by parents, youth and others informed about the role played by rural and remote parents in the development and identification of careers by young people. The paper presents the findings from a series of focus group interviews carried out in rural communities. A delphi-based, qualitative, "bottom up" strategy was used to identify the needs. All information presented derived directly from the rural respondents. The detailed list of needs offered reflects potential activities which both parents, schools and other community organizations might engage in to help relatively disadvantaged (in career development terms) rural youth.

Résumé

Cette étude constitue une liste des besoins identifiés par les parents, les jeunes adultes et autres personnes informées sur le rôle joué par les parents ruraux et éloignés dans le développement et l'identification des carrières des jeunes adultes. Cette communication présente les conclusions d'une série d'entrevues de groupe focus faites dans des communautés rurales. Une stratégie, basée sur une stratégie delphi qualitative, a été utilisée pour identifier les besoins; on a surtout consulté les principaux intéressés. Toutes les informations présentées proviennent directement des répondants ruraux. Cette liste détaillée de besoins reflète les activités potentielles que les parents, écoles ou autres organisations communautaires peuvent offrir pour aider les jeunes adultes ruraux relativement désavantagés (en termes de développement de carrières).

INTRODUCTION

Research over the past ten years has led to a greater understanding and appreciation for the role played by parents in the career identification and career seeking activities of youth. However, relatively little literature exists which discusses the role played by parents in the career identification and career seeking activities of rural youth. This study explored this role. Evidence that young people do listen to their parents in such basic areas as religious beliefs, political beliefs, and career plans (Otto, 1987; Otto, 1989; Young & Friesen, 1992) contradicts one of the most widely held and uncritically accepted myths in our society: that parents are unimportant when it comes to young people's career plans.

Using a modified delphi strategy, a series of focus group meetings were held in three small rural communities. Though the primary focus of the study was on parents and on their perspective of what they needed to help their children make informed career decisions, we also interviewed

youth, and others from the communities who worked closely with and were informed about parents needs.

Parental Influence On Careers

Research has shown that parents do significantly influence their children's career choices (Herr & Cramer, 1988; Otto, 1987; Young, Friesen & Pearson, 1988; Young, Friesen & Dillabough, 1991) and hence should be considered important agents in the task of helping young people make informed career choices. The literature describes the significance of parental role modelling on youth career decisions (Bearg, 1980; Goodole & Hall, 1976; Lavine, 1982; Leung, Wright & Foster, 1987; Miller, 1982) and outlines programs designed to foster parental involvement in career identification (Castricone, Wright Finan & Gumble, 1982; Hoyt, 1984; Whiston, 1989). Miller (1982), for example, reported the strong influence parents have on the career choices of their children. Work on the importance of value systems and family work patterns and on the importance of providing particular types of educational information to parents (e.g. problem solving strategies for assisting their young to make career decisions) can also be found (i.e. Conger & Hiebert, undated; Hohenshil, 1980; Hopson & Hough, 1976; Krammer, 1985; Levine, 1985; Lopez & Andrews, 1987; Lyson, 1986; Schulenberg, Vondracek & Crouter, 1984).

Poole (1983), in a study of almost 800 Australian 14-year-old youth, found that "students who spoke frequently with their parents had far more definite ideas on both job choices and educational plans. Conversely, those who never talked to parents were most undecided about the future" (p. 25). Students who had good relationships with parents were more willing to seek guidance from various other sources. This data suggested that parents were a major influence on students' occupational aspirations and expectations at age fourteen. Poole cautions that this reliance on parents may partly reflect the inadequacy of guidance facilities offered by schools and other organizations.

While parental influence is evident in students' decisions, one must ask whether parental career advice (in terms of information, training prerequisites, labour market forecasts, etc.) is adequately informed. Parents' ability to access resources is also an issue (Poole, 1983). Furthermore, Palmer and Cochran (1988) found that, while children's career development and choices were influenced by parents and that parents wanted to assist their children in these areas, there was no empirical data to support the success of such parental involvement.

Issues Influencing The Career Development of Rural Youth

Little is known about the rural parents' role and involvement in the career development of their young. There is also little information on

possible differences in the career development patterns of urban versus rural youth. To shed light on these career development questions a list of questions and topics about which information should be sought was created based on the literature and the experience of the research team members. The resultant list was split into two parts, one reflecting family/community and cultural factors, the other job/career and labour-related factors.

A number of problems and situations were hypothesized that related to beliefs and traditions in a family or community which could hamper a young person's chances of making a successful career adjustment. It was hypothesized that respondents would identify the following issues: (a) pressures resulting from close bonding of young people to parents, peers, home and community; (b) believing it is easier and cheaper for students to stay at or near home for schooling; (c) problems associated with parents who encourage young people to return home when stressed; (d) young people bypassing unfamiliar communities for communities with existing support networks; (e) ethnocentric beliefs that the home community is the best or only place to be; (f) role models who demonstrate that people can adapt successfully to local difficult situations; (g) a narrow range of diverse careers being modeled and an absence of mentors to encourage youth to utilize good career decision-making skills; (h) limited information on the availability of jobs "away," alternative careers, and the nature of the labour market; and (i) low expectations of finding local work and little information about local jobs.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

A "bottom up" strategy was used in this study. Rural parents, youth, and others residing in rural communities, who were knowledgeable about the situations in rural families, were chosen as participants in the study. Because we wanted to gain a thorough understanding of the needs of rural parents, we chose our focus group samples based upon a model offered by Goffman (1963) who suggested that an understanding of a situation was best achieved by approaching those who already "owned" that situation. In the current study, parents and the young people were the "owners." Goffman stated that quality information can also be obtained from a second group which he called the "wise," individuals who are informed about and socially accepted by those who "owned" the target situation. In this study, the "wise" or "informed" group was made up of public health nurses, school counsellors, principals, union personnel, local business people and community leaders, who resided in the targeted rural communities. Data collected reflected not only what parents perceived as needs but also reflected what informed community respondents believed were parents' needs.

Three communities with a population of less than 1500 were chosen for the study. Meetings were held with parents and informed community members in all communities. In two communities, meetings were held with youth from the local high school graduating class. In one community, members of a class made up of older rural youth, all of whom were attending a retraining program for early school leavers, were also interviewed. A total of 11 meetings were held and the views of 60 persons were collected. Group size differed in each meeting. The "wise" groups varied from two to five members. Parent groups had from five to six members and the youth groups contained from seven to nine respondents. Two facilitators were used in all of the focus groups. The facilitators, who were researchers involved in the current research, both had a minimum of fifteen years each in group counselling and group facilitation.

Structure of Focus Group Meetings

Two different meeting formats, both using a modified Delphi strategy (Butler & Howell, 1980; Kaufman & English, 1979; McKillip, 1987; Myers, 1988) were used. The format allowed for the capture of cumulatively more rich and detailed data. A description of the overall methodology and the data analysis procedures is described elsewhere (Jeffery, Hache & Lehr, 1995).

The first two meetings, one with a parent group and a second with informed respondents, were largely unstructured. Participants were simply asked to inform the researchers about local career related concerns and activities, career related problems and any useful "help" strategies or activities which they had seen being utilized locally by parents. To build on the information gathered in these initial sessions, a second group of meetings was held. These involved both the collection of new information and efforts to seek confirmation, elaboration and evaluation of previously heard views. In these second phase meetings, more in-depth comments about career related parent-child interactions were sought. Each second phase session was divided into three parts. During the first part, participants were asked, as in phase one, to comment on career related concerns and ways parents helped to address these concerns. In the second part, general themes which had been raised in a previous group, but not in the ongoing session, were introduced for confirmation and comment. In the closing portion, specific topics and problem solutions or intervention strategies, which had been offered in a previous group but not mentioned in the ongoing session, were introduced for discussion.

The list of topics and problem solutions used by session leaders in a meeting was derived from an analysis of the information gathered in the previous sessions. Following each meeting, the research team analyzed session notes and produced updated topic and problem solutions lists.

These lists allowed topics in the current session to be compared with previously introduced points and hence allowed the session leader to introduce points in parts two and three of each meeting. In other words, whenever a topic was spontaneously raised and discussed by a given group, it was removed from the list of topics to be explored in that session. This technique, while demanding for the researchers, allowed for open ended data-gathering and the capture of very rich and detailed qualitative data.

Data Recording and Analysis Procedures

To allow lists to be readily developed and to allow for economical data gathering, a "direct to print" methodology was developed to record the information offered by the various groups of respondents. During each session, comments, points, and suggestions made by individual participants were directly keyed into a computer in a near verbatim or paraphrased form by one of the researchers as they were offered. The resultant raw data was akin to highly detailed minutes. The form and detail in the recorded data depended on the nature of the ongoing discussion and interaction. Intermediary steps of tape-recording and transcribing were omitted.

Immediately following the session, notes were read and edited independently by the note taker and the session leader. When clarification was needed, the two consulted and if necessary, a session participant was contacted. Analysis involved similar points and contributions being edited for redundancy and sorted. Related comments were grouped and assigned an appropriate "need" or "strategy" label. Master lists of categorized needs, concerns and strategies, all derived directly from participants, were thus developed. This grass roots, "bottom up" approach was deemed to offer insights potentially useful in the design, development and delivery of rural career support services.

RESULTS

Respondents in this study believed that rural parents have concerns and needs which they considered to be different from the concerns and needs of urban parents. It is appreciated by the authors that many of the needs identified by the participants may not be as unique to the rural situation as the participants deemed them to be. Many of the concerns identified may also reflect situations found in selected (i.e. low income) urban groups. The findings of the study were categorized and described using the following headings:

1. Parents' and Families' Personal Needs
2. Individual Youth Needs
3. Secondary School Program Needs

4. Post-Secondary Training/Education Needs
5. Community Support and Information Access

A summary of the specific needs within each of these categories is discussed below.

Parents' and Families' Personal Needs

Several of the events and situations identified were categorized by the researchers as being of a personal nature. Respondents often mentioned situations that involved significant financial strain on parents resulting from having a child attending a post-secondary institution outside the community. They expressed the view that, while the financial strain for any family can be significant, for the rural parent this strain is much greater. Compared to parents whose young were able to live "at home," respondents said the rural parent needed to pay for more than just the usual tuition and books. The extra costs respondents identified included travel, communication, accommodations, and more expensive meals away from home.

The "correctness" of a young person's initial career choice, especially in financial terms was also viewed as more crucial for rural parents. Because rural families felt they were spending more supporting young persons studying "away," erroneous first career choices were considered to be more expensive for them. These higher costs were seen to result in rural parents often placing higher pressure on their young person to "succeed." Respondents believed that the cost to rural parents of youths making an uninformed or inappropriate career choice exceeded the cost to urban parents.

Respondents, because of costs, strongly felt that educational or training decisions should be well informed and carefully made. They commented that it was only with considerable financial hardship that parents were able to send a child away to study and that parents were especially concerned that a young person might seek training in a career in which there was little chance for employment. Respondents strongly believed that rural parents needed assistance coping with their greater financial burden.

Respondents were concerned about situations where children, while away, experienced financial difficulties. The view was often expressed that there were not any resources available to deal with or prevent crises such as a young person quitting and returning home when confronted with financial difficulty.

Respondents consistently said rural parents were ill-advised about career education and not adequately knowledgeable about what career information was available. They believed parents did not know where to get information and considered themselves to be ill served by career support agencies. The only solutions they could see rested with them

becoming organized, within their own communities, to bring in career-related services for their youth. It was widely agreed that such organizing was not occurring. A lack of knowledge in the area of career decision-making was recognized as was an enthusiasm to educate themselves and to organize the community.

While the respondents believed that information was crucial to making informed decisions, they believed parents felt largely helpless to provide the support and advice their children needed. Several statements were made which suggested that, along with a lack of knowledge of where to look and what to look for, several parents were uneasy and lacking in confidence when it came to making contact with distant agencies and information sources. Parents wanted to know about the kinds of questions to ask their youth and they wanted to have more help in communicating with youth about career related decisions. Respondents believed that parents lacked empowerment and lacked confidence in their ability to search out and communicate information effectively to their young.

Explicit in all of the focus groups was the need and the expressed wish for rural parents to communicate more effectively with their young. Associated with this need were expressed concerns related to parents' low self-confidence and self-esteem. In other words, respondents believed parents wanted to have more influence (not control) on their youth's decisions and wanted to develop a personal sense of control concerning their ability to help their youth but did not know how to do this. Parents wanted to be able to make suggestions and give advice without feeling like they were interfering to excess. Respondents felt that rural parents needed to be engaged in a communication process that they often felt ill-equipped to handle.

Issues related to "leaving home" were frequently expressed. This included, for example, how parents could encourage independence in their children and about how they could deal with their own feelings related to their separation from their children. Concerns were often linked more to unknown elements associated with moving away from home than to a lack of information about making career decisions. Identified were concerns related to preparing youth for transition periods (i.e. knowing what to expect once high school is finished, planning ahead) and to helping youth cope with everyday life in big cities.

Individual Youth Needs

Respondents in the focus groups felt rural youth needed to develop a greater sense of control and autonomy when it came to identifying future careers. They felt youth needed to contemplate their futures more carefully in order to make good career decisions. Youth-focused issues, identified by the respondents, addressed the need for youth to: gain a greater understanding of the changing culture and the way changes

would affect future career choices; be willing to look beyond “dreamed about” careers and at “more realistic” career choices; and, give greater consideration to the long term effects of career decisions. Respondents believed that youth should give greater consideration to the consequences of a dependence upon seasonal work and the seasonal work/unemployment insurance cycle (both common in the rural communities studied).

Respondents also expressed the need for youth counselling services in their communities. Associated with counselling services were identified needs for more structured support related to individual career pathing. It was felt that youth needed to explore career options other than those traditional to a family or community and that youth needed help when re-entering a career path after an initial failure. It was felt that local schools and organized community resources were key to helping young people with respect to these needs.

It was commonly noted that rural and remote communities often do not have professional resource people available to help with career decision making. Known resources that are sometimes available include school, local, or regional counsellors and occasional itinerant job counsellors. Occasionally, others (often themselves parents and recognized community leaders) help out.

Respondents suggested changes in the secondary education program. They wanted better career education programs and a wider range of role models on career day. It was felt career days should also offer information in a greater variety of formats such as print, video, and resource people. Suggestions were made to expose young people to “outside” resources through field trips focusing on career and post-secondary training. It was also felt that many services were offered too late, namely just a few months before high school was finished.

Post-Secondary Training/Education Needs

Respondents believed rural settings would benefit from having alternative career training opportunities such as job shadowing and mentoring. In addition, they felt post-secondary institutions should be more considerate of what they felt were the unique characteristics and special needs of applicants from rural areas (i.e. possible academic “deficiencies”). Information about funding available for specific training programs was seen to be lacking in rural areas and concerns were expressed that not enough was known about how to access alternative training programs (especially for youth who do not meet entrance requirements).

Frequently concerns were expressed about problems related to filling out necessary forms and “red tape.” When students were accepted to training/education institutions, parents expressed concerns about accurately filling out the forms needed to ensure the young students would

get needed money. The issues identified were a combination of concerns about personal competency, accessible guidance and getting through red tape.

As noted earlier, students from rural and remote communities typically have to travel to urban centres for post-secondary education. The needed moves, often over great distances, resulted in expenditures usually not associated with living in an urban area and attending a local educational facility. Rural respondents experienced financial strain and often parents felt they were unable to offer needed support without either themselves or their youth experiencing additional heavy debt load. Many complained that young people, often due to government sponsored loans, ended up with large debts. Rural parents wanted a more equitable arrangement that would allow their youth fairer treatment.

Community Support and Information Access

The need for increased community awareness of the career problems of rural youth was of paramount importance in focus group discussions. It was felt that leadership within and cooperation between communities that would allow access to shared resources was key to helping parents better help their youth. Having accessible resource people to organize community groups and prepare parents in rural communities to be more positive local role models was seen as the way to accomplish this. Because not all young people would need to leave their communities, respondents believed it was vital to know the economic potential of their own areas so that young people who wished to remain in the community might have the opportunity to be future community builders. The instability and unpredictability of economic resources within rural communities presented extra concerns with respect to addressing the needs which respondents felt existed.

Respondents were very cognizant of what their communities could do to assist parents seeking to help their young make good career decisions. Respondents wanted more networking with other communities around shared concerns. Realizing that establishing networks of rural communities could be helpful in terms of gaining and sharing information, they recommended more inter-community contacts and more sharing of services. In summary, it was felt that there was a need for diverse strategies to obtain career information and a need to have direct access to information in each community. Suggestions for the creation of local, accessible resource centres to facilitate accessing urban based information centres (e.g. libraries, "800 number" career hot lines, teleconferencing links) were offered.

Respondents appreciated that many of the resources they felt communities needed required the support of government and other organiza-

tions such as school boards. They believed that, in the short run, very little could typically be done directly by individual parents.

Summary

As hypothesized when starting the study, it was believed that rural youth and their families would be closely bonded and that this bonding would be reflected in a low level of parental encouragement toward job or career related activities likely to result in the young person leaving the community. This view was found to be inaccurate. Similarly, support was not found for a second related hypothesis that parents would encourage their young to return home if confronted with stressful situations while away. Staying at home, accepting social assistance or unemployment insurance was not a solution widely encouraged by parents. It was further hypothesized that parents would identify sending their young to nearby communities for training as a means of reducing financial strain. Though one of the major issues raised by parents was the financial burden of sending their young away to school, most parents saw this burden as inevitable and prepared themselves. Sending their young to nearby communities did not come up as an issue, however, because of finances, parents wanted their young to make well-informed career decisions.

All other hypothesized issues were raised and discussed in varying degrees by respondents in the current study. It was hypothesized for example that respondents would support the ethnocentric belief that the home community was the best or only place to be. There was a mixed response to this issue. On the one hand, parents would like to see their young stay close to home, yet, on the other hand, they were concerned that they would become dependant upon the seasonal work/unemployment cycle. As hypothesized, a lot of support was given to the importance of mentors and role models within the community as well as an acknowledgement that young people had limited exposure to the diversity of careers from which they could choose. As hypothesized, respondents also saw a clear need for career and labour market information especially since they felt their young were only exposed to a limited number of careers within their own community. With respect to this latter point, respondents expressed disappointment with the effectiveness of secondary schools in preparing young people for future education and training.

Results of the current study confirm the observation of other researchers (Herr & Cramer, 1988; Otto, 1987; Young, Friesen & Pearson, 1988; Young, Friesen & Dillabough, 1991) that parents influence their children's career choices. Other researchers (Bearg, 1980; Goodole & Hall, 1976; Lavine, 1982; Leung, Wright & Foster, 1987; Miller, 1982) have also described the significance of parental role modelling on youth career decisions. Parents in the current study, however, often saw themselves as poor role models because they had little education. They simply

felt they lacked adequate experience and knowledge to offer their young sound educational advice. Many had left formal schooling by grade six or earlier and doubted they could have an impact on their young.

While rural parents believe their young have the ability to compete successfully, these parents lack a knowledge of diverse careers, ready access to information about careers, and local and distant support networks. Parental desires that youth 'get training' and 'make it on their own' were very strong. These results suggest that future programs, designed to help parents help their youth, need to focus on helping parents gain the confidence they need to network with each other as well as address how they can effectively communicate with their youth about important life decisions.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

The "traditional" way of approaching career development and identification is through services provided by a career counsellor. In rural communities, this approach has limitations. Most regional high schools and school boards serving rural and remote youth seek to have counsellors and to provide career guidance services. Because there are often many students spread over a large area, service to many is limited and for some, non-existent. Services such as rural career days and fairs, for example, were described as being unable to attract a wide enough range of representatives from diverse businesses and professions to be effective and hence were felt to typically be of limited worth. Young people were simply not exposed to the range of careers that exist. When young people attended such events, usually requiring long bus rides, there was often too little time and too much information to be grasped.

Respondents in the current study suggest that there are differences in rural and urban communities which impact upon the career development of youth and that these differences create special problems which are not adequately addressed. This study did not focus upon urban and rural differences, however, rural respondents believe that rural parents' difficulties are different from those of urban parents. Because respondents hold a belief that there is difference between the needs of rural parents compared to the needs of urban parents, we suggest this is an area which warrants further exploration.

Many of our current counsellor training programs and much of our available career support materials appear to reflect what is perceived to be an "urban assumption." Many of the existing counsellor training programs, for example, do not make any explicit reference to rural clientele. These programs, while focusing on counselling skills and career identification strategies and tools, fail to recognize that the rural needs and context, in some respects, may be different from the urban. Existing career development programs seem, for example, to be based

on the notions that clientele have at least incidental exposure to a wide range of careers and probable physical proximity to counselling centres and resources, mentors and "information." While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore possible modifications in current counsellor training programs, it is strongly recommended that the perceived differences in the career identification and development needs of rural youth be studied further.

It is fully appreciated that not all urban clientele make the same use of "nearby" resources nor have the same skills to access resources. It is also highly probable that some urban groups also experience similar problems of "isolation" and high costs. Obviously, there is considerable diversity in both the urban and rural settings. In a rural setting clients simply "see" fewer careers and they cannot readily avail themselves of services (counsellors, mentors, visits to sites, etc.) without detailed planning and often expensive and time consuming travel. Even when visits are arranged, they tend to be rushed, closely scheduled and often difficult to follow up on in a personal and direct way.

The current study suggests that parents can be very important in supporting and facilitating the career decisions of their young. Counsellors and others interested in addressing the career related needs of rural and remote youth would be wise to access and empower parents in this process. Parents, for example, made the suggestion that the schools should hold a career day for them! This would allow them to see what careers were available and in turn allow them to better help their youth make their career decisions.

While rural counsellors can be prime direct-service providers, this study suggests that they need to be encouraged to take on a "facilitator" role. Parents and other locally available and interested resources might then be better utilized. The findings in this study also suggest that materials and supports need to be created for, and made accessible to, such direct service providers. Materials, such as those developed by Jeffery and Lehr (1994) are seen as an example of a type of support that counsellors might use.

This study demonstrates the need for more information on the career needs of rural and remote youth. More needs to be known about how parents, peers, teachers and others in the rural community contribute to the career development and decisions of youth. Not enough is known about ways of delivering services and information to rural populations. The economic implications and potential losses incurred by not exploiting the resources of rural and remote youth needs to be appreciated.

The research strategy used in the present study accentuated the nature of possible differences between rural and urban situations. It was the intent of the authors to identify the nature of the rural situation and rural needs and to identify potentially significant urban/rural differences as

perceived by those in rural settings. The study does not attempt to comment on the degree of any such differences.

Specific recommendations meant to enhance the career possibility of youth in rural communities are suggested below. These ideas are meant to provide a springboard for discussion and for further work. Firstly, a priority should be placed on further enhancing career support services for rural communities. These could make use of electronic web sites and other related electronic delivery systems. Mobile career centres, like the one used in rural and remote areas of Newfoundland and British Columbia might be considered in other areas. Secondly, career counsellor training programs should incorporate modules for persons planning to work in rural settings. These modules might examine rural issues, discuss alternative sources of information and foster an awareness of the rural situation and rural needs. National employment centre linkages should also be established for students seeking career related information. These systems could help rural youth access individuals and employers willing to offer mentoring or e-mail information on specific jobs and careers. This system could also offer information on national job markets. Finally, research on rural counselling concerns should be encouraged with national links between rural counsellors established.

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