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## Addressing Student Needs Throughout Development

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Shari Couture

*University of Calgary*

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### ABSTRACT

This study surveyed 651 adolescents in grades 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 to explore differences in their self-perceived needs. Students in junior high grades reported higher needs in the areas of setting clear and consistent expectations, academic skills, sexuality, physical well-being, and self-esteem, while senior high grades highlighted future oriented needs concerning careers, academics and self-management. Grade 7 students placed more emphasis on interpersonal relationships, involvement with other students, and home life than did other junior high students. No differences were found between the senior high grades. Gender differences also were found across grades. The results highlight the importance of considering developmental differences when planning programs to address the needs of adolescent students.

### RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur a mené une enquête auprès de 651 adolescents de la septième à la douzième année afin d'étudier les différences entre leurs besoins tels qu'ils les percevaient. Les élèves du premier cycle du secondaire ont exprimé des besoins plus élevés concernant les domaines suivants : attentes bien définies et consistantes, compétences scolaires, sexualité, bien-être physique et estime de soi. Par contre, les élèves du deuxième cycle du secondaire ont mis au premier plan des besoins concernant leur avenir en matière de carrière, d'études et d'autogestion. Par rapport aux autres étudiants du premier cycle, ceux de septième année attachaient plus d'importance aux relations interpersonnelles, aux relations avec leurs camarades et à la vie de famille. Aucune différence n'a été observée entre les divers niveaux du deuxième cycle du secondaire. Des différences entre les sexes ont pu être identifiées à tous les niveaux scolaires. Les résultats soulignent l'importance de prendre en compte les différences relatives au développement lors de l'élaboration de programmes destinés aux élèves adolescents.

The transition to adulthood for today's youth is filled with rapid change and increasing choices (Gysbers, Lapan, & Blair, 1999; Hess & Richards, 1999; Nader, 1990; Seffrin, 1990). Adolescents face the specter of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; the changing nature of the family unit; increased poverty and violence; and constant negative media images of drug use, sexual themes, and violent conflict resolution (Hess & Richards, 1999). They live in a society in which technological advances occur almost daily and where they are forced to question their ability to obtain financial security equal to that of their parents (Rice, 1996). If the needs of youth are not addressed, they are more at risk of lower school performance, dropping out of school, or becoming involved in other self-defeating or destructive behaviours (Cameron, Mutter, & Hamilton, 1991; Mainous, Martin, Oler, Richardson, & Haney, 1996). As schools work to prepare students for this ever-changing environment, and begin to step beyond academics to provide a comprehensive education, programs must be responsive to the varying needs of students throughout their development.

Over the past two decades, the delivery of school guidance and counselling services has begun to move from a therapeutic, position-focused model that delivers services to specific populations, towards a comprehensive model that delivers programs and services to all students (Diachuk et al., 1995; Gysbers & Henderson, 1997). Such comprehensive guidance models promote programs that address a broad spectrum of personal/social, career, and educational needs as an integral part of the total school program (Gysbers & Henderson, 1997; Hargens & Gysbers, 1984; Hiebert, 1994).

One main characteristic of comprehensive guidance programs is that they are developmental (Borders & Drury, 1992; Gysbers & Henderson, 1997; Hargens & Gysbers, 1984). A developmental program presents a framework for guidance to be proactive and preventative, helping students acquire knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and attitudes necessary for successful mastery of normal developmental tasks (Borders & Drury, 1992). This involves determining what skills students need at different points in their lives and adjusting programs to enhance these skills at each developmental stage.

Gysbers (1997) points out that different grade levels require different allocations of counsellor time. Studies examining the needs of junior high and senior high school students have found concerns over social identity decrease, and academic concerns increase from beginning to late adolescence (Lau, 1990; Nurmi, 1989; Sahin & Sahin, 1995). Millar and Gallagher (1996) report that concerns over social efficacy decrease with age. Klingman (1998) found high school students were more interested in addressing areas associated with military service while junior high school students were more interested in physical fitness, school, and social life. In a study with junior high students (Kemeny, 1997), Grade 9 students reported greater need for counselling services than students in Grade 7 and 8 and grade 7 students felt a greater need for changes in interpersonal interactions between students at school.

On the whole, studies examining the developmental trends within adolescents are surprisingly scarce and those that exist do not paint a consistent picture. For example, Millar and Gallagher (1996) report an overall downward trend in adolescent concerns as they age, however, Collins (1998) reports an overall increase in level of need as students reach grade 12. Thus, there is a need to explore adolescent needs further to provide a clearer picture of developmental differences in student reported needs. This study uses the results of a needs assessment with junior high and senior high students in order to move closer to meeting this goal.

#### METHODOLOGY

##### *Sample*

The student sample consisted of 651 students, 242 from a junior high school, and 409 from a senior high school. The sample represented 53% of the junior high and 37% of the high school population. All students in the junior high school whose parents gave consent participated in the study. In the senior high

school the survey was administered to students in social studies class (a compulsory subject) in order to reach half of the student population. The student sample was composed of 291 males and 358 females (two students did not identify gender). See Table 1. Student ages ranged from 9 to 18 years with a mean junior high student age of 3.09 and a mean high school age of 16.29. The majority of the sample, 93%, reported English as their first language and 88% had lived in Canada all their lives. In addition, 77% of the students intended to attend some type of post-secondary schooling, while only 4% thought they would go directly into the labor force. Finally, 81% of the sample reported that they were 'A' or 'B' level students, while less than 1% thought they were failing.

TABLE 1  
*Count and Percentage of Students: Grades and Gender*

Gender	Grade						Total
	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Male	21.0	36.0	26.0	69.0	80.0	59.0	291.0
% within Gender	7.2	12.4	8.9	23.7	27.5	20.3	100.0
% within Grade	27.6	39.6	34.7	55.2	49.4	49.2	44.8
% of Total	3.2	5.5	4.0	10.6	12.3	9.1	44.8
Female	55.0	55.0	49.0	56.0	82.0	61.0	358.0
% within Gender	15.4	15.4	13.7	15.6	22.9	17.0	100.0
% within Grade	72.4	60.4	65.3	44.8	50.6	50.8	55.2
% of Total	8.5	8.5	7.6	8.6	12.6	9.4	55.2
Totals	76.0	91.0	75.0	125.0	162.0	120.0	649.0
% within Grade	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
% of Total	11.7	14.0	11.6	19.3	25.0	18.5	100.0

### *Instrument Development*

The survey instruments used in this study were based on the "Health Needs Survey," developed by Collins (1993, 1998). Its development included a comprehensive literature review to generate a list of potential survey items followed by a Delphi process and extensive field testing to produce the final survey form. The instrument demonstrates a stable factor structure and adequate reliability with high school students and has been the source of many published studies (Cairns, Collins, & Hiebert, 1994; Collins & Angen, 1997; Collins & Hiebert, 1995; Hiebert, Collins, & Cairns, 1994; Hiebert, Kemeny, & Kurchak, 1998).

This instrument was for use in junior high comprehensive guidance programs by adding guidance items, validating the revised instrument with focus groups of students and teachers, and pilot testing the result (Hiebert, et al., 1998). In the current study, the instrument was further refined through a series of focus groups composed of students, teachers, and parents.

The resulting instrument consisted of 239 questions in the senior high version and 230 in the junior high survey. Each version has 16 student needs subscales grouped into three clusters: Services (physical well-being, personal counseling, sexuality, family and home life, school performance), Instruction (academic skills, health promotion, physical well-being, mental/emotional health, safety and accident prevention, sexuality, interpersonal relationships), and Environment (school building and grounds, involvement with other students, involvement with teachers and staff, issues outside of school). Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" indicating the extent to which that item represented a need for them personally. The instrument shows acceptable test-retest reliability, with Kronbach alphas (two week retest interval) ranging from 0.79 to 0.94 ( $M = 0.87$ ) for subscales in the junior high survey and 0.35 to 0.92 ( $M = 0.72$ ) for subscales in the high school survey.

### *Dependent Variables*

Only the 230 items common to both instruments were used as the data source for this study. Each item was scored using a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale and these served as dependent measures in the data analysis. In addition, seven general themes were identified by a panel of guidance counsellors and researchers with extensive experience in comprehensive guidance and counselling. Mean scores on these general themes also were used as dependent measures. The general themes were: self-esteem (feel good about abilities, appearance, degree of peer acceptance, willingness to stand up for themselves), self-management (time management, adherence to school expectations), crisis resolution (assistance in solving immediate high risk problems), equality (acceptance of others), life planning skills (future education, career, and adult responsibilities), relationship skills (communication and relationship building skills), and clear and consistent expectations (regarding roles and expectations of teachers and parents).

### *Procedure*

A campaign to promote involvement and increase the completion rate was coordinated by the school's leadership team. Hallway posters and announcements on the school's public address system were created, with the theme of "Speak out! It's your opportunity to have a voice!" In the senior high school a pop and pizza incentive was offered to all classes achieving a 90% return rate of consent forms. (All consent forms counted in the return rate regardless of whether they indicated a willingness to complete the survey.)

Students completed the survey anonymously on optically scored answer sheets. One class period (50 minutes) was allowed to complete the survey. Junior high students completed the survey in a homeroom period and senior high students completed it in their regularly scheduled social studies class.

## RESULTS

There were two stages used to examine the results. First, the survey items, subscales, and general theme were rank-ordered according to mean score. Second, several MANOVAs were conducted to examine grade differences in the three clusters, 16 subscales, and seven general themes.

### *Descriptive Results*

High priority needs were defined as the top 20 survey items, the top five subscales, and the top three general themes.

*Top priority survey items.* There were 12 of the top 20 items common to both junior high and senior high students. Students wanted better temperature and humidity control in the school, improvements to washroom and change rooms, better fitness facilities, and more sports programs. They wanted to know more about the requirement of careers and wanted help deciding which school courses to take. They also wanted a mid-morning break, longer lunchtime, alternative eating areas, and access to microwave ovens. Finally, they said that they would do better in school if they found their classes more interesting and if their teachers showed more understanding about stress they experienced. Items that were in the senior high but not in the junior high priority list were focused on learning more about jobs or college and university programs, learning first aid, having more freedom in selecting classes and teachers, better air quality in school, and cleaner building and grounds. Items that were in the junior high but not in the senior high priority list included: more high school tours, more field trips, better sanitary cafeteria practices, having their own locker and larger desks, wanting more input into assignments, wanting teachers to coordinate homework better, and wanting a smoke-free environment.

*Top priority subscale scores.* Four of the top five subscales were common to both junior and senior high students. Both groups identified changes in school building and grounds as the highest priority. Both also scored instruction relating to academic skills, involvement with other students, and safety and accident prevention in the top five. The only item that was not common to the top five for both groups pertained to physical well-being: Junior high students wanted more instruction in this area while senior high students wanted more services to increase physical well-being.

*Top priority general themes.* The general theme scores also were quite similar for junior high and senior high students. Both groups identified life planning skills and receiving clear and consistent expectations as top priorities. Senior high students identified needs in the area of self-management as the third priority,

while junior high students rated it last (issues around self-esteem were third for junior high students). It seems that older students perceive a greater need for skills required to maintain balance and become more intrinsically motivated, while younger students have a greater need to feel good about their abilities and appearance, and be accepted by their peers.

### *Analysis of Subscale and General Theme Scores*

To explore statistically reliable differences between students a series of grade (7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) by gender (male, female) MANOVAs were conducted for each of the three clusters (Services, Instruction, Environment) using the subscales as dependent variables. A fourth MANOVA was conducted using the general theme scores as dependent variables.

*Clusters and subscale differences.* There was a significant main effect for grade in all three clusters, services,  $F(25, 3180) = 2.60, p > 0.01$ , instruction,  $F(35, 3150) = 3.20, p > 0.01$ , and environment,  $F(20, 2456) = 3.56, p < 0.01$ . Follow-up univariate tests found significant differences in eight subscale: services for issues at home, instruction concerning academic skills, physical well-being, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships, plus issues pertaining to school building and grounds, other students, and teachers (see Table 2). Post hoc Tukey tests found no significant differences within the senior high grades, but there were differences within grades in junior high in three subscales: home life, interpersonal relationships, and involvement with other students. In addition, many differences were found between junior high and senior high grades where either grades 7, 8 or 9 students reported significantly higher needs than high school students did. See Table 2.

Only one significant gender by grade interaction was found, namely in the environment cluster,  $F(20, 2456) = 2.36, p > 0.01$ . Follow-up univariate tests also revealed that the interaction effect came from the subscale concerned with school building and grounds,  $F(5, 614) = 2.58, p = 0.03$ . Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that grade 10 male students reported school building and grounds as more important than grade 10 females and grade 12 male students reported this subscale as less important than females.

*General themes score differences.* Follow-up univariate tests revealed that grade differences came from 3 of the 7 general theme areas: self esteem,  $F(5, 633) = 3.96, p < 0.01$ , relationship skills,  $F(5, 633) = 3.62, p < 0.01$  and the need for clear and consistent expectations,  $F(5, 633) = 3.62, p < 0.01$ . Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that all cases but one, the differences were between junior high and high school grades.

### *Analysis of scores on Individual Items*

In cases where the main effect for grade was significant on the subscale or general theme scores, a two-way MANOVA (gender by grade) was completed on the items that comprised that subscale or theme. As a result, 11 MANOVAs were

TABLE 2  
*Significant Between Grades Differences on Subscale and General Theme Scores*

Scales and General Themes	Grade Differences			
	All Grades		Within Junior High	Between Junior and Senior High
	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	Significance	Significance
Services:				
Home Life	3.71	<0.01	7>9	7>10, 11
Instruction:				
Academic Skills	4.89	<0.01		8>10, 12 9>12
Physical Well-being	2.79	<0.01		7>10, 11, 12 8>10, 12
Sexuality	4.10	<0.01		7>10, 11, 12 8>10
Interpersonal Relationships	4.81	<0.01	7>9	7>9, 10, 11, 12 8>11, 12
Environment:				
School Building & Grounds	3.54	<0.01		8>11, 12
Involvement with Other Students	6.48	<0.01	7>9	7>10, 11, 12 8>10, 11, 12
Involvement with Teachers	2.30	0.04		7>10
General Theme:				
Self-Esteem	3.96	<0.01		7>12
Relationship Skills	5.76	<0.01	7>9	7>10, 11, 12 8>12
Clear and Consistent Expectations	3.62	<0.01		7>10, 11, 12 8>12

conducted using the item means as the dependent variable. The significant findings are reported below.

*Services related to home life and academic skills instruction.* In the home life subscale, grade 7 students reported significantly higher scores than older

grades for services related to coping with their parent's separation or divorce and understanding parent expectations. Grade 7 students also expressed greater need to receiving clear and consistent expectations from parents and clearer instruction from teachers on academic assignments. In addition, grade 8 students reported a greater need than students in senior high grades did for receiving clear and consistent behavioural expectations and having input into rules and assignments. In the academic skills subscale, younger grades reported the need for more skills in test taking, receiving clearer instructions, and having more time and resources for completing class work. Students in junior high grades expressed greater need for more option courses, field trips, and guest speakers, while students in senior high grades wanted more emphasis on core subjects. In addition, grade 9 students reported significantly higher scores than students in grades 10, 11, and 12 in areas related to facilitating transition to high school.

*Physical well-being and sexuality instruction.* Grade 7 and 8 students expressed greater need for instruction concerning effects of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco; decreasing risk of fatal diseases; and care of skin, hair and teeth compared to students in high school grades. Grade 7 and 8 students also expressed greater need for instruction concerning changes in one's body and feelings, and the differences between making love and having sex compared to students in high school grades. Grade 7 students were also more concerned with sexually transmitted diseases than students in grades 10 and 12.

*Interpersonal relationships.* Grade 7 and 8 students had significantly higher scores than older students in areas relating to peer acceptance, interpersonal relationships, communication, and conflict resolution. Grade 7 student also expressed greater need for help in dating and relationships with siblings. Differences also were found between grade 7 and grade 9 students on items related to building friendships, communication with family and friends, standing up for oneself, feeling more accepted, student use of alcohol and drugs, and getting along with students in other grades. Grade 9 students expressed greater need than students in high school grades did for instruction pertaining to creating a smoke free environment and interacting with others in different social circles. Students in grades 7 and 9 expressed a greater need than students in senior high grades for stronger student teacher relationships. Furthermore, grade 9 students expressed a stronger need for receiving more understanding from their teachers than grade 11 students and all three junior high grades expressed a stronger need for having greater involvement in school compared to students in senior high grades.

#### SUMMARY

Overall, although the descriptive results revealed a high level of consistency between junior and senior high students' perceptions of their needs, however, the inferential analyses revealed grade differences in 50% of the subscale scores and in approximately 40 % of the general theme scores. Grade 7 students tended to

be more concerned than grade 9 students with their home life, interpersonal relationships, and their involvement with other students, which corroborates the findings of Hiebert et al. (1998).

The majority of the differences in this study were found between junior and senior high grades. As in past research (Lau, 1990; Millar & Gallagher, 1996; Nurmi, 1989; Sahin & Sahin, 1995), younger students in this study, and grade 7 students in particular, were more concerned with relationships and social problems than older students. Although both younger and older students in this study placed high priority on life planning, older students placed greater emphasis on future-oriented concerns related to careers, academics, and self-management which supports previous research indicating that concerns over one's personal future increases towards late adolescence (Lau, 1990; Nurmi, 1989; Sahin & Sahin, 1995). However, it is important to note that in this study, younger students had higher scores in most needs areas. Grade 7 students and to a lesser extent grade 8 students reported a higher need for receiving clear and consistent expectations; more instruction in academic skills, sexuality, and physical well-being; and more guidance for self-esteem issues. Perhaps, programs need to be more encompassing at lower grades in order for students to feel prepared for future life experiences.

#### DISCUSSION

In general, the results of this study highlight the importance of considering developmental differences between students. As the research begins to grow and patterns become more apparent, there is clearer support for future decisions around differential allocation of resources and programming within the student population. For example, programs in junior high, and especially in grade 7, may be more effective if there is a higher focus on interpersonal relationships skills, while older students may benefit from programs with a more future oriented academic focus. Grade 9 students may have special needs in terms of accessing academic resources, learning skills in taking notes, encountering teachers who demonstrate a greater understanding of student problems and who create increased relevance of school work, and coping with issues associated with interactions between different social circles. Furthermore, because gender functioned differently across grades with respect to changes to school building and grounds, different programs may necessary for male and female students. Overall, programs in junior high may need to tailored to different grade levels, while it may be possible for programs in high school to be more homogeneous from grade to grade.

Although developmental differences are highlighted in this paper, a general observation in this study is the importance of the physical environment students face each day at school. Perhaps this reflects the notion that humans grow from concrete thinkers to more abstract thinkers as they develop (Berger, 1995). It could also be that people need to meet their physical needs before they are motivated to meet higher order needs (Maslow, 1971). In this study, students are

reporting that their basic needs are not being met. Thus, it seems logical that once the higher priority needs of students have been met, they may be more motivated to meet the more abstract higher order needs (Hiebert et al., 1998).

This study presents some interesting implications related to student need for academic and vocational planning. The majority of students in this study expect to pursue post-secondary education rather than going directly into the labour force. Considering the decreasing number of spots in university and the increasing entrance requirements, these student expectations are discrepant with the reality that the students will experience. This suggests that the high priority placed on career and life planning by students in this study is very appropriate.

The participation-based model used in instrument development was a strength of this study. The inclusion of many stakeholders in the development of the instrument allowed for a large amount of enthusiasm for, and ownership of, the project within the school community. It also ensured that the survey instrument contained the questions most relevant to students. However, it should be remembered that the results represent the perceptions of students in the schools surveyed and caution should be used when generalizing to other adolescent populations. Similar research conducted in additional schools would permit exploring for themes that were common across schools and allow for greater generalization about adolescent needs and the patterns throughout development.

Takanishi (1993) observes that "adolescence may well be the most maligned and misunderstood age group in our culture" (p. 460). The research presented above suggests a need to reevaluate a singular, universal notion of adolescence. Each student negotiates his or her own way from childhood to adulthood, even though they may be living in the same community and attending the same school. In order for school programs to be effective it must be realized that within this similar context, the experiences of students from separate grades are unique. The closer that programs come to addressing the specific needs of different developmental subgroups of students, the more confident students will feel about making the developmental transitions through junior high and senior high school.

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#### About the Author

Shari Couture's practice interest is counselling with adolescents and their families. Her research interest is the study of adolescents' needs and "turning points" in the context of the family.

Address correspondence to Shari Couture, 2629 21st Street, Calgary, Alberta, T2T 5A9. E-mail address <scouture@ucalgary.ca>.