



## Career Perceptions of Middle School Youth

A Literature Review

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Several key points are repeated in current literature on youth career perceptions. First, middle school career education must be age appropriate; recycled adult or high school programs are not adequate. Toward this end, a program designed for middle school students should allow the students to explore multiple careers and be deliberately structured to widen their concepts of future possibilities. Counselors should expect the students to arrive with sex-role stereotypes, especially with respect to STEM and vocational careers, and need to explicitly show students how these stereotypes are limiting. Middle school students, particularly girls, have a hazy understanding of the economic realities of various career choices. Middle school career education should include not only salary examples, but also exercises that illustrate what those salary numbers mean on a daily basis. A successful middle school program includes very concrete activities (interviews, job shadowing, and projects), and ties current academic work to future career success. Also, it addresses students’ very real concerns about how one’s personal and familial values inform career choices.

Second, the enduring career development theories and tools used today work best for white, middle class, male adults. The theories and tools are useful when counseling middle school students, girls, people of color, etc. but possible bias in the results must be considered and should be discussed with the person being counseled. Also, explicit interventions are needed to get girls, particularly girls of color, to consider STEM as a viable career field for themselves. These interventions can be as simple as showing how a STEM career might be a good fit with personal values (such as helping people) that girls may express, or as involved as extracurricular clubs and camps.

High-profile professions such as doctor and lawyer have a much higher percentage of women than do professions like engineer or computer scientist. The literature seems to attribute this to favorable representations of law and medicine in the media and to the very clear “helping” aspects of the jobs. When describing career development programs developed

for STEM, papers paid little attention to proving that the activities were engaging to middle schoolers, making blanket promises of student interest instead. For example, one paper included a list of topics guaranteed to be interesting to middle school students. Unfortunately, it was a very stereotypically masculine list, containing items like “video games” and “bridges”. For this reason, I suggest that current Web sites are better barometers of actual student interest. For example, Girl-Start.com draws hundreds of girls to its offers of free online lessons in HTML and Macromedia Flash, as well as bulletin boards where participants can chat about their creations. Features like these match recommendations made by CCT’s Project Imagine for engaging girls.

### **Career Development Theory and Tools**

**Leong, F.T.L., Ed. (1995). Career development and vocational behavior of racial and ethnic minorities. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (LEA) Publishers.**

This volume consists of ten self-contained chapters addressing Theory and Research, Assessment and Intervention, and Future Directions concerning African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American career development.

**Farmer, H.S. (1992). Diversity and women’s career development: from adolescence to adulthood. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.**

**Super’s Career Development Theory** (1957, 1986) divides career development into Growth (ages 4-14), Exploratory, and Establishment stages.

**Holland’s RIASEC Theory** focuses on making satisfying career choices by matching interests with activities required by particular occupations.

**Betz & Hackett (1981) developed a 20 item Occupational Self-Efficacy Scale.**

Self-efficacy is a person’s beliefs concerning his or her ability to successfully perform a given task or behavior. Self-efficacy and/or self-esteem are mentioned repeatedly in the literature as crucial to career choice and persistence, particularly related to girls choosing careers in STEM or other non-traditional fields.

## **Career Interest Inventories**

According to the National Institute for Education, the goal of career interest inventories should be to actively encourage students to consider careers outside of their “social learning experiences,” rather than to place further limits on their career explorations.

There are two large categories of interest inventories, those using an empirical scale and those using a homogeneous scale (Farmer, 1995). An example of an inventory with an empirical scale is the Strong Interest Inventory (SII); the SII compares student responses against the responses of people currently working in selected occupations. This kind of comparison tends to perpetuate the status quo instead of encouraging students to explore beyond the limits of socialized career expectations. Inventories using homogeneous scales include the Self Directed Search (SDS) and the Kuder Occupational Interest Survey (KOIS) focus on matching careers to areas in which students express interest and are more successful at producing gender-fair results.

## **Existing Resources**

**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (1991). A guide to middle school curriculum planning in Exploring Life’s Work. ERIC. ED343724.**

Exploring Life’s Work: A Wisconsin middle school core curriculum that “engages students in activities with content drawn from the full spectrum of subjects (math, science, English, social studies, technology education, home economics, business education, etc.).

**Brandeis University. (1992). Future Options Education: careers and middle school youth. ERIC. ED352460.**

Future Options Education (FOE) emphasizes drop-out prevention and “introduces students to the world of work, providing career information that is age and stage appropriate and involving middle schoolers in job shadowing, monitored work experience, pre-apprenticeship, entrepreneurship, and community and neighborhood service.

**Refvem, J. (August 2000). Let’s go surfing: Use of the Internet for career counseling in the schools. ERIC CASS Digest.**

This article suggests the use of CX-Online as a way for counselors to use the Internet to create the “planned happenstance” approach

to students' career education advocated by Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz.

**Peavy, R.V. (1995). Constructivist career counseling. ERIC CASS Digest.**

Peavy envisions the "revision and re-formation" of counseling to meet the changing needs of the times and to move away from a need "to correct human deficit—and toward a view of the person as holistic" and sets forth several suggestions for doing so.

**Middle School-Specific Information**

**Kerka, S. (1994). Vocational education in the middle school. ERIC Digest. ED377314.**

Kerka advocates that "middle school students need to learn to think about the future; recognize their responsibility for educational planning; broaden their aspirations beyond the stereotypes of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level; develop and maintain self-esteem; develop cognitive complexity (essential for the knowledge work of the future); have parental support for career choices; understand how school relates to future life roles; and recognize the broad scope of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

**Borgen, W.A. & Amundson, N.E. (1995). Models of adolescent transition. ERIC CASS Digest.**

This article focuses on older adolescents (high school age), and describes an "expanded view of career counseling" aimed at easing the transition from high school by paying attention to the developmental needs of adolescents; the suggestions would certainly apply to 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> graders embarking on career education.

**Hood, M.W. (November/December 1990). The great wish list: What middle school teachers need to work smarter. *Vocational Education Journal* v 65, no. 7, page 34-35.**

According to Hood, middle school "is when students learn basic values and ideals. They explore beliefs and discuss attitudes... This calls for a multi-materials approach in virtually every vocational course. Students must be able to see, feel, hear, smell and touch course content."

**Phipps, B.J. (Fall 1995). Career dreams of preadolescent students. *Journal of Career Development*, vol 22, no. 1, 19-32.**

Children's reasons for their career "choices" were coded into the following categories: Undeveloped, Economic, Altruistic, Role Model, and Interests. The children's choices were, in general, highly sex-stereotyped (the boys' more so than the girls') and chosen from a small group of very visible careers (e.g. doctor, lawyer, nurse, athlete, beautician.)

**Sellers, N., Satcher, J., & Comas, R. (April 1999). Children's occupational aspirations: Comparisons by gender, gender role identity, and socioeconomic status. *ASCA Professional School Counseling*, v2, no. 4, 314-317.**

The authors state that "while elementary age children may not have a firm sense of themselves as masculine or feminine [as indicated by scores on the Children's Sex Role Inventory], they tend to select occupations which fall along gender lines. It is likely that these occupational choices are based on environmental and sociological influences, the outcomes of which may, to some extent, be influenced by the elementary school guidance counselor."

**McDonald, J.L. & Jessell, J.C. (Summer 1992). Influence of selected variables on occupational attitudes and perceived occupational abilities of young adolescents. *Journal of Career Development*, v 18, no. 4, 239-249.**

Five factors considered were family life situation, self-esteem, socioeconomic status, cognitive vocational complexity, and gender. "Of the five variables investigated, level of self-esteem had the greatest impact on young adolescents' reported occupational attitudes and perceived occupational abilities, thus indicating that self-esteem functions as a crucial factor in their vocational identity."

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