

Role Models in the Career Development Process of Youth

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Role models are described in the literature as “a person you respect, follow, look up to or want to be like” (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007, p.385). Basoc and Howe (1979) state: “Role models have been defined as people whose lives and activities influence another person in some way” (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006, p. 297). “Adolescents often look to adults in order to determine appropriate and acceptable behavior, as well as to identify models of who they want to be like” (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Xue, 2009, p.777).

Adults perceived as role models can facilitate career development by modeling behavior, offering hope and providing guidance in the process. Noted in Bryant and Zimmerman (2003) “Research on mentors and role model interventions offers evidence that adolescents’ relationships with significant adult others contribute to their identity development and foster resilience” (Blechman, 1992; Hamilton & Darling, 1996). Role models have been shown to be related to the achievement of youth in many career-related outcomes. Negative outcomes may be more likely for youth who lack role models (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 37).

One of the developmental tasks associated with adolescence is the exploration of and identification with a variety of career paths. The adolescent years often lay the foundation for future career pursuit, and studies have shown the particular importance of early adolescence in the career development process. Stated in Turner and Lapan (2002), “Middle school students who develop competency in career planning and exploration gain confidence in such career development tasks as understanding the relationship

between learning and work, understanding how to gain the information necessary to seek and obtain various jobs, and understanding the process of career planning” (Lapan, Gysbers, Multon, & Pike, 1997; O’Brien, Dukstein, Jackson, Tomlinson, & Kamatuka, 1999). Role models involved with adolescents during this time take on a particular significance.

Bandura’s (1986) Social Learning Theory lends support for the significance of role models. It suggests that one way children learn is “by observing and experiencing the behaviour of others” (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007, p.384). From the learning that takes place during these interactions, children construct their own beliefs and behaviors, known as socialization (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007, p. 384). This process has been shown to have an important association with role models (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007, p. 384). Bandura also suggests that common attributes between role models and children, such as gender or race, can suggest potential in similarity to youth and thus, they may be more inclined to imitate when these characteristics are present (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007, p. 384).

With this background in mind, my goal in this literature review is to further investigate role models in the career development process of youth and offer suggestions to youth practitioners on how they can better assist youth with this important aspect of development.

Parents as Role Models

While it may be thought that during adolescence youth separate from their parents, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) found that they actually spend more time

with them than with any other adults (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 38). It would seem this time together would naturally lend itself to the formation of a close relationship where parents may enjoy a heightened level of influence as youth naturally trust and look up to them. In fact, this is true, shared in research conducted by Hamilton and Darling (1996). “The consistency with which adolescents report parents as important persons in their lives suggests that most adolescents look up to and view their parents as positive role models” (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 39). Existing research has shown a positive relationship between adolescent career development and parental support (Turner & Lapan, 2002, p.45).

The present study sought to establish two hypotheses related to the influence of parents: perceived parental support would predict young adolescents’ career self-efficacy (or their confidence in performing career specific tasks), and career interests, using Holland occupational themes. Middle school students from a middle-class community participated. The overall finding was that adolescent career self-efficacy was predicted by perceived parental support but career interests in the Holland theme categories were not (Turner & Lapan, 2002). In fact, almost one half of youth career-task related confidence came from parent support. Whereas older adolescents seem to depend on environmental supports beyond parents in developing their career-related confidence, young youth seem to rely heavily on their perceptions of parent support as they aspire to pursue specific careers and develop confidence in meeting the challenges associated with these. Because it is known that the development of career self-efficacy has implications for youth achieving broader career goals, the overall finding supports the importance of parents getting involved in career development during early adolescence.

Another study also looked at the role of parental influences on young adolescents' career development. This study highlighted gaps that exist in the current literature, specifically the association between parenting actions and career development among middle school students. A suggestion for additional research was made in order to help bridge theory and practice as recent developments have noted links between parenting behaviors and youth career development, but the influence of specific parenting variables remain unknown (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.199).

The study was conducted in order to provide information about the impact of particular parental behaviors, specifically the connection between perceived parent-child relationships and the career maturity and self-efficacy of early adolescents. Participants came from three middle schools found in a Midwestern state and represented diversity in SES. Overall and similar to the other study, parental behaviors were more related to the career decision-making self-efficacy of youth rather than their career maturity (Keller & Whiston, 2008). The opinions of parents regarding career issues are clearly valued by youth, and more importantly, youth perceptions of how much a parent believes in their ability to make career-related decisions may have impact on how much the youth actually believes in themselves (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.210). Additionally, parental support behaviors were shown to be more significant than specific career-related parental actions. Positive relationships between parents and youth and parental attitudes that display interest in and concern for youth appear to have more value in the career development process than does sharing particular career information. "More specifically, it appears that young adolescents need to know their parents are interested in them as individuals,

believe in their abilities, trust them to make good decisions, and are proud of them” (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p. 211).

Role Model Attributes

The way in which children view the characteristics of role models was the focus of one study involving adolescents in the UK. Previous research has shown a lack of agreement about individuals who serve as role models, specifically male teachers serving as role models for male students. “Caring” or “kind” were ranked by both genders as the most important characteristic for a role model (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). Additional positive personality traits such as helpfulness and hard working emerged as well. Interestingly, boys focused more on physical attributes of role models while girls considered worker/helper attributes as more important. Another important finding from the study was that relatives were cited most often as most important role models by both genders, with girls more often choosing female relatives and boys choosing male. One or both parents were chosen by 35% of youth as their most important role model. Very few teachers were listed, girls named friends and boys named sportsmen second. Overall, this study lends support to the theory that often loving relatives, likely those who share some similar characteristics, serve as role models in their lives of youth.

Role Models Related to Race and Gender

It is known that youth have a tendency to seek out role models who are like them in some identifiable way, such as race or gender. Role models play a particularly important role in the lives of women due to a lack of female role models in nontraditional

careers. Females continue to be outnumbered by males in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers (Holmes, Redmond, Thomas & High, 2012, p.137).

Previous research has demonstrated that this gap between genders begins in adolescence, shown by girls in their decreased interest and confidence in math and science (Holmes et al., 2012, p. 138). This could be a result of girls acting in ways that show their awareness of typical gender stereotypes associated with boys and their expertise in these subjects (Holmes et al., 2012, p.138). The use of female role models has been shown to be one promising approach in combating these types of gender stereotypes (Holmes et al., 2012, p. 138).

In this study, it was hypothesized that female engineering role models would encourage adolescent girls to pursue future careers in engineering and as a result, improve their interests in and attitudes toward math and science. The study involved an afterschool mentoring program (in this case, mentors were described as potential role models) focused on engineering topics. Both attitudes toward the mentoring experience and confidence levels in math and science were measured. Consistent with expectations, the girls' perceptions of the relationship were high. Their level of confidence in math and science was also high, an interesting finding given that adolescent girls typically report low confidence in these areas. It is thought that perhaps the program helped the youth refrain from constructing negative attitudes toward STEM and, thus, sustain their previously reported high levels of confidence. Although the mentoring relationship was not shown to significantly relate to confidence levels, a correlation was demonstrated between the girls' perceived quality of the mentoring relationship and their confidence levels in math.

Noting role models in different professional positions that are similar to oneself in terms of race and gender provides youth with ideas about prospects for their own futures (Zirkel, 2002, p. 357). It is during the period of adolescence, when youth are in a constant state of reflection, that role models of this type become especially meaningful. “As young people become increasingly aware of how they fit into a larger social context, race-and gender-matched role models can provide invaluable information to address concerns they may have about whether society has a place for them” (Zirkel, 2002, p. 358).

The present study involved two hypotheses - one relating to youth having a race- and gender-matched role model and showing improvements in academic interest and academic achievement and the other concerned with the match, rather than content, of the relationship. Participants were 80 youth from an ethnically diverse city. In terms of availability of role models, the results showed the majority of students of color reported not having a race-and gender-matched role model available to them, while most white students did. In addition, a college education was less likely to be required in the job of the role models reported by students of color. Results indicated that improved academic performance was more likely for students who reported having a role model than those who did not. These students were also more likely to think about their futures, report more educational and professional goals and prefer adults to peers as sources of influence. Regardless of the level of education of their role model, students with role models showed greater overall investment in educational issues than those without. Considering these findings, it could be that the relationship itself, rather than learning any

specific knowledge from it, serves an important function for youth of color by giving them a window of hope for the possibilities that exist in the future.

Role Models Related to Career Outcomes

Previous research has suggested the opportunity to interact with adults who have shown achievement in an area of interest for youth has been shown to be beneficial (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995). Furthermore, when work related skills are not developed due to a lack of basic skills, poor outcomes for youth are often the result (Bynner, 1997). The present study examined work-related skills and career role models in adolescence in relation to career maturity, controlling for individual and family factors. Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) assert, "Career maturity, a developmental concept, is the constellation of physical, social, cognitive, and affective components that constitutes an individual's degree of readiness to cope with internal and external career demands appropriate for his/her age group" (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.200). It is also suggested that by addressing career maturity in early adolescence, career-related issues are less likely to emerge later in life (Super, 1990).

British adolescents participated in the study, ages 14-18 years, and career maturity was measured through five items using a rating scale. Career maturity was found to be highly associated with youth having a career role model and job related skills (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). "In fact, having a career role model and having basic work related skills were more important predictors of career maturity than parental involvement, academic motivation, self-confidence, socioeconomic status, and family structure" (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002, p. 41). Interestingly, from these findings it is suggested that

career maturity is fluid, as demographic influences made up a very small percentage of its variance.

Youth advocates such as Oman (2002), believe that the development of assets promotes positive outcomes, increases skills, and prevents problem behaviors (Hayes, Huey, Hull, & Saxon, 2012, p.409). In the present study, role models were identified under the category of youth assets, and it was anticipated that the achievement of career decisions would be associated with one having assets, including role models (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 410). “According to Bandura’s (1977, 1986) social cognitive theory, expectations of personal efficacy are critical to the initiation and persistence of behavioral performance in all aspects of human development” (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 410). Career decision self-efficacy is described as “the belief in one’s ability to successfully complete tasks necessary for making career decisions” (Hayes et al., 2012, p. 410). Bandura’s theory, when applied to career decisions, suggests that a person’s expectations in his/her ability to be successful in making career-related decisions are largely related to whether the career decision making process is started and continued. Simply put, if youth think they can successfully accomplish something like a particular career, they are more likely to stick with the tasks involved and pursue the outcome.

The authors sought to determine whether higher levels of career decision self-efficacy (CDSE) could be predicted by the assets of unattached Jamaican youth. Unattached youth were described as not enrolled in school or employed by a job, ages 14-24, and at-risk for negative behaviors. The study also tested whether this positive relationship was due to particular assets. All participants were enrolled in a Corps Program, a month-long preparation program followed by a six-month job internship.

Results indicated that there was predictive relationship between youth assets and career decision self-efficacy. Four of the nine assets, one being non-parental adult role models, were primarily responsible for this link. This outcome lends support to the significance of role models, particularly their involvement in encouraging youth to cultivate positive expectations in their abilities to make good decisions in choosing careers.

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings of the few studies that were reviewed that relatives of youth, particularly parents, are often the ones to serve as role models in the career development process. While both parents were named by youth as role models, parents of the same sex, specifically, seem to have the greatest influence. Not related specifically to career development, but nonetheless important for understanding factors youth consider in choosing role models, positive personality traits emerged as significant. I believe there is a link in these traits (e.g. caring, kind and helpful) and the approach of parents who show relationship characteristics such as interest in and concern for their youth, a supportive behavior perceived by youth as meaningful. Perceived parental support has been shown to be most related to adolescent career self-efficacy, or their career-task related confidence. Overall, findings suggest it is the support of and relationship with parents, not so much their specific actions, that matters most for young adolescents. This finding is related to the youth development principle that suggests the importance of the establishment of positive, consistent relationships with adults (Ferrari, 2003, p. 203), Though parents as role models continue to demonstrate importance in the

literature on the career development of youth, questions remain as to specific ways their behavior affects a number of career variables.

Another pattern that emerged in the literature review is the importance of role models during early adolescence. It makes sense that the process of role modeling may likely have its biggest impact as youth are working through the corresponding developmental task of forming an identity. This idea aligns with the developmental approach of positive youth development principles which suggests focused attention on periods that come before decision-making and is also consistent with a community youth development approach which suggests an implementation of proactive responses to anticipated developmental challenges (Ferrari, 2003, p.204). The study of role models in relation to this critical early period of adolescence is one that needs further attention from researchers.

Role models continue to be noted in the literature as serving a particularly important function for youth who lack exposure to a variety of careers or who may face stereotyping or discrimination, such as females, youth of color and those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Exposure to female role models for young adolescent girls was associated with confidence levels related to school subjects such as math and science and matched role models demonstrated impact on the academic performance and goal-oriented, future-thinking of young youth. These studies further support the idea behind the “similarity hypothesis,” when youth seek out career role models due to a shared characteristic, such as race or gender, and their influence may be especially meaningful because youth believe the experiences of the role model are relevant to them, since they are like them in some way (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004, p.226).

Finally, from the review, it was shown that role models in the career development process have important implications for several career-related outcomes of youth. The presence of reported career role models by youth were shown to be important predictors of career maturity and youth assets, one being a non-parental adult role model, were significant predictors of career decision self-efficacy. These findings are in line with previous research that has suggested this relationship (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006).

Suggestions for Youth Development Professionals

There are many implications that arise out of this literature review for youth professionals, most importantly that it is clear role models play a critical role in the career development of youth. A noteworthy idea to consider in the planning of career development outcomes for youth is the importance of intentionally incorporating a community youth development focus so that programs can also relate to these global initiatives (Ferrari, 2003, p.202).

As a result of the established significant impact of parents on youth in facilitating the career development process, combined with the knowledge of the youth development principle on the importance of forming positive and meaningful relationships with adults, professionals should encourage youth to develop and/or strengthen relationships with parents and other adults who serve as role models in their lives. In order to model positive relationship behaviors, youth professionals, themselves, can try to replicate the same types of behaviors the research has shown to be important to parent-youth relationships, such as showing interest in ideas of youth (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.212).

Given that adolescents are greatly influenced by peers, the use of peers as positive career role models should be considered as an additional potential resource for youth in their career development. This would probably be most ideal for those students who identified their peers as important sources of information regarding careers and when positive relationships can be identified with the help of adults. The goal of establishing positive relationships with peers is considered a key element of positive youth development programs (Ferrari, 2003, p.202).

Limited access to a variety of career role models can put youth at a disadvantage when developing career identities. Increasing exposure to role models in a variety of professions will broaden the perceived possibilities of youth, particularly those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. For many youth, however, it can be tough to form relationships with adults outside of their immediate environment (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003, p.37). Adolescents may need assistance in this area. Youth professionals can help youth identify career role models in their surrounding community, particularly those that work in an area of interest. They can also help them arrange for meaningful learning experiences such as job shadowing or conducting informational interviews. Using social media to connect youth to role models willing to communicate about career-related issues would be another possibility. Opportunities for discussion and reflection should always follow exposure to role models (Ferrari, 2003, p.218).

Interactions with role models also offer opportunities for youth to contribute through partnership in the community, another youth development principle to consider in planning. Youth, along with the guidance of practitioners, can find ways to give back to their community through their connection to role models and their place of work, so

that they, along with the community, both benefit from their contributions. Youth practitioners can help facilitate this kind of experience by brainstorming ideas of service with youth, or offering to assist with logistics.

Programming should provide youth of color and females opportunities for exposure to role models that are similar in race and gender as a way to promote potential, motivation and opportunities for the future. In addition, efforts to combat career gender-typing should be made. Youth development professionals can ask open-ended, reflective questions about careers that are typically considered by one gender as a way to explore youth perceptions, challenge beliefs in a non-confrontational way, and encourage more open-mindedness. Of course, encouraging these youth to also pursue role models who are different from them has advantages. “Role models who are different from oneself may help to challenge and dispel myths and stereotypes and may promote greater appreciation of diversity” (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004, p. 231). Youth professionals can also reach out to minority professionals in the community, educate them about their potential importance to minority youth, and encourage them to get involved as role models (Karunanayake & Nauta, 2004, p. 233).

The confidence level of youth in their abilities to perform career-related tasks or make career-related decisions and its relationship to careers aspirations was a significant theme that emerged in the literature. Careers that at one time may have been viewed as impossible become more of a reality through the development of confidence (Turner & Lapan, 2002, p. 52). “According to several theorists and researchers, individuals who lack confidence in their abilities to make productive career plans will most likely experience frustration when trying to do so, which may then result in premature or poor

career decisions especially among females” (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.200).

Interventions that focus on building skills and competencies will not only incorporate youth development principles, but will also improve levels of confidence which can, in turn, lead to increased persistence in the career exploration process.

Encouraging and supporting youth in their development of career exploration skills would be another suggestion for professionals. Find opportunities for them to take a variety of career assessments, provide follow-up activities in order to help youth interpret the information they discover, and help them to develop next steps. “Learning experiences that are active, participatory, and reflective are recommended elements of the positive youth development model” (Ferrari, 2003, p.208).

Finally, it would make sense that, in addition to working directly with youth, one would also want to consider ways of having indirect impact and work with their families. Help parents cultivate attributes shown to be significant to youth (e.g. kindness) so that they can elevate their level of influence. Educate parents on the extensive influence of family relationships and attitudes as well as on the importance of their involvement early on in career development (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p.212). In addition, it was suggested that parents who desire to be involved in the career development of their children typically have access to limited information so providing parent education/training in facilitating this process is another area of suggestion (Keller & Whiston, 2008, p. 214).

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