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**Relationship Between School Leavers' Career Development
and Psychological Adjustment**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in Occupational Psychology
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Abstract

The school leaver's readiness to undertake successful steps toward the world of work was examined in the context of the changing occupational structure, secondary education provision, and the developmental implications of the prolongation of the period between school and work. The hypotheses that (a) the school leaver's level of career development would be related to the clarity of a career direction, and (b) the clarity of school leaver's career goals would be related to personal adjustment in the post-school environment, were tested over a two-week period with 157 school leavers undertaking an academic route toward the world of work. Established instruments were chosen to measure dimensions of effective career development and selected psychological well-being (life satisfaction) and personality variables (self-esteem, and locus of control), indicative of well-adjusted, mature behaviour. Additional issues relating to subjects' prior career guidance and exploration experiences and reasons for choosing their given post-school path were also examined.

Preliminary descriptive, reliability, and factor analyses of the established instruments yielded results consistent with theoretical expectations and with the results of previous research, providing support for the structural validity and internal consistency of the measurement for the present data. Direct discriminant function analyses were used to analyze the data relating to the research hypotheses, while research questions relating to additional issues were examined, in the context of subjects' decision status, using contingency analyses. Results of the subject's decision status revealed over half of the present sample were either unclear of a career direction or had not given any thought to the types of jobs they would like to do. For the present sample of school leavers, 56.7 per cent had chosen to continue on to higher education unaware of the occupational field for which their course will limit, and with little knowledge of their ability to adapt to the types of jobs for which they will eventually be qualified. Career development and career decision status was significantly related, supporting the first hypothesis. Those who were undecided about a career goal also lacked the attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours that both the developmental literature, and the objectives underlying career/transition education consider as necessary for successful movement into the world of work. Career decision status was found to be significantly related to life satisfaction and self-esteem. There was no support for the relationship of locus of control to career decidedness, providing only partial support for the second hypothesis, and suggesting that school leavers who chose a given post-school path with no clear career direction in mind are less likely to be satisfied with their lives, and less likely to feel self confident than school leavers undertaking a path with the intention of attaining a career goal. Results relating to additional research questions revealed that under half of the subjects who had received career/transition education during their secondary school years had found it to be useful in helping them to decide what to do on leaving school. The majority of subjects indicated that improvements needed to be made to the nature of career-related information available, that career advice required more professionalism, and that more work experience/exploration opportunities should be available during their secondary school years. Over half

indicated that the anticipation of job satisfaction was the main reason for undertaking higher education. For subjects who were decided about a career, a second main reason for attending university was to meet the requirements of a preferred job. For those who were undecided about a career direction, the desire to fulfil parental expectations rated second to the belief that higher qualifications will lead to job satisfaction, and a number also reported that they either did not know why they had undertaken further education or that they felt there was nothing else to do. Subjects who had undertaken higher education with no job in mind also reported parental expectations, in addition to the desire to continue learning as main reasons for attending university.

The implications of the present findings, for policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers in the field of career/transition education were discussed. Limitations of the present study were discussed in relevant sections of the study and these were summarised in the final chapter. Recommendations arising out of the research are offered and the importance of a more professional approach in the evaluation of the need, implementation, and impact of career development interventions in secondary schools is stressed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most critical stages in a person's career, both for the individual and for national economic and manpower planning, is the process of transition from school to work. Recent changes in the nature and availability of employment, coupled with the declining opportunities for youth in the labour market and the general upward shift in the level of education and training required to carry out the work that is available, has resulted in a more lengthy, uncertain, and drawn-out process than in past generations. Furthermore, the process of transition from school to work is also a modern day rite of passage for the young person, because entry into working life confers adult status, in many respects, in our society. Thus, the prolongation of the period between school and work also means that, the average young person in modern society, faces a longer period before assuming the responsibilities and authority associated with adulthood. It is, therefore, imperative that young people are prepared with the requisite knowledge and skills that will enable them to initiate purposeful steps toward the world of work.

While schools can neither provide the specific vocational (job) training required by our modern employment structure, nor thwart the most prevalent symptom of this structure, youth unemployment, they do have a critical role to play in assisting their students' acquisition of the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that will enable them, on leaving school, to undertake informed action toward a meaningful, self-fulfilling, and successful position in the working world.

The later years of high school are particularly crucial in facilitating the young person's capacity to undertake effective steps toward the world of work. It is during these years in which many experiences and decisions related to post-high school transitions occur (Super & Hall, 1978). That high school students should engage in exploratory behaviour is a widely endorsed prescription among career development theorists and practitioners. Those who explore are thought to acquire the information about themselves and about the world of work that is necessary to engage in effective career decision-making and implementation behaviours (Grotevant, Cooper, & Kramer, 1986). Yet despite persistent interest, in New Zealand, in facilitating students' awareness of self and occupations during the high school years (Daley, 1990) not much is known about how well these interventions actually serve to facilitate adaptive career behaviour in the post-school environment.

Though the transition from school to work has become a popular research topic, and one on which much has been written (Korndorffer, 1987), there have been relatively few studies in New Zealand which have attempted to consider how well-prepared school leavers are to undertake effective steps toward entry into the world of work. On the contrary, there has been a tendency for research to concentrate on what high

school students want to do on leaving school, and the extent to which their job or career aspirations are influenced by, for instance, ethnic orientation, socioeconomic background, or educational attainment (for example, Lauder & Hughes, 1990; Nash, Harker, & Charters 1989). Such work has obviously contributed to our understanding of the educational and occupational implications for different groups of school leavers, and, incidentally, has provided valuable information for the formulation of equity policies. However, while such differences in aspirations are important, these demographic characteristics alone do not tell us the extent to which the student's resolve to undertake a given path on leaving school is part of a well informed decision, linked to future goals. Further, with an emphasis on exploring group differences, demographic variables provide little insight into how differences within groups exert themselves, or the implications of these differences for group members. The fact that young people will vary considerably in the planfulness of their approach to life, in their tendency to anticipate choices which they will have to make, in their exploration of alternatives, and in their tendency to acquire relevant information, suggests that educators also need data on these characteristics (Blustein, 1988; Holland, Power, & Gottfredson, 1980; Jordaan & Heyde, 1979; Lokan, Boss, & Patsula, 1982; Super & Overstreet, 1960). Researchers need this knowledge in evaluating programmes, and practitioners need information on these characteristics as a preliminary for planning and developing interventions.

While other investigations in the area have sought to ascertain young people's experiences in the post-school environment (Catherwood, 1985; Lauder, Khan, & McGlenn, 1988; Scott, Austin, & Mallard, 1985) these, too, are fraught with problems. Much of this work has been based on samples that were too small, atypical or geographically restricted to permit generally applicable conclusions. Moreover, such studies have tended to rely on the impressions of school personnel, vocational training tutors, youth workers, and the researcher(s) which, although invaluable in themselves, provide only a partial insight into the adaptive capacity of school leavers and are loaded with moral judgements and evaluations.

Such gaps and biases in our knowledge of the school leaver's progress along a given pathway is particularly difficult to understand, in part, because the past decade in New Zealand has seen a phenomenal increase in financial and human resources directed to the development of school-based transition education (Daley, 1990; New Zealand Government, 1988, 1989b). Given the present economic stringencies in our country as well, it is extremely difficult to understand why all of the emphasis has been on implementation and none on evaluation. That there is sustained interest in the need to provide young people both the access and the opportunity for full participation in adult working life is evident. The draft plan for the development of post-compulsory education and training in New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 1989b) highlights this concern. As resources continue to be committed to the expansion of programmes to facilitate students' capacity to move successfully toward the world of work, the need to monitor, evaluate, and research such efforts also increases. Given the mediocrity prevalent in the design and implementation of current provision in this area, such evaluation activity has become particularly urgent.

The process of transition from school to work is one of the crucial points in the socialisation process. As such, an understanding of the variables involved and the difficulties experienced is essential to anyone concerned with high school students' anticipatory coping with, and adjustment in, the post-school environment.

The present study was designed to examine school leavers' coping repertoire for making the prevocational and vocational decisions required by their psychological and social development, and the structure and content of our educational and occupational systems. An understanding of the degree to which school leavers possess the types of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours characteristic of effective career development during the post-high school years (Super, 1957, 1963, 1983; Super & Jordaan, 1974) may help to clarify just how well-prepared these young people are to undertake successful steps toward entry into the world of work. A second aim of the present study was to examine the nature of the relationship between school leavers' career decidedness and aspects of psychological well-being and development that may provide information about the adjustive function of career development competence in the post-school environment. Given the value of exploration as an important stimulus for the development of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours that facilitate effective career decision-making and career choice implementation behaviours (Harren, 1979; Holland, 1985; Jordaan, 1963; Stumpf et. al., 1983; Super, 1963), information about the nature of school leavers' prior exploratory activities would also seem important to a full understanding of their career development. The third aim of the present study then, was to sample the nature of exploratory behaviours recent school leavers' had engaged in prior to leaving school.

Given the above intentions, it is inevitable that the present study will be limited. The aim to examine the implications of school leavers' readiness for adjustment in the post-school environment, considers only one of a series of phases that could be included in the overall process of transition from school (Maizels, 1970). Very little is known about the main actors in the process, however, and it was anticipated that a focus on the school leaver as the unit of analysis would not only provide insight into a dimension that has received relatively little attention in past research in New Zealand, but also stimulate awareness of an area that should be seen to have an important role in future research.

As the social and psychological context of the contemporary New Zealand school leaver provides the background to the present study, this context is examined in detail before embarking on the central theme of the research. Chapter Two examines two key elements of the social context that have important implications for the school leaver's career development: (i) changes in the nature and availability of employment; and, (ii) the educational responses to preparing school students for movement into the post-school environment. Work provides an important stimulus for adult development and adjustment, and experiences within the secondary school context play an important mediating role in the young person's

capacity to begin to develop psychologically as a working adult. The links between the educational and occupational context are also examined within the context of the school leaver's life stage in order to fully conceptualise the consequences of school leavers' career choice competence for psychological adjustment in the post-school environment.

Chapter Three reviews the relevant literature examining dimensions of effective career development. Emphasis is given to studies which have examined the relationship of career maturity variables to outcomes in career decision-making, and to the influence of structured interventions in this process. The chapter also provides a summary of the literature relating personality and psychological well-being variables to career development, and attempts to ascertain conceptually, the consequences of school leavers' career choice competence for psychological adjustment in the post-school environment. The aims, hypotheses, and research questions addressed in the present study are summarised at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Four outlines the method used in the present study. Chapter Five provides the results relating to the preliminary analysis of the measures of career maturity and psychological adjustment that were included. This exercise was done to attain a peripheral objective: to examine the validity of the measures of career maturity and psychological adjustment used in the present study. Thus, Chapter Five summarises the results of principal components analyses carried out on the measures of career maturity and psychological adjustment at the scale level, and the discussion of these results in light of the extent to which the respective measures tap the constructs under investigation. The results of a principal components analysis carried out on the pool of items within each measure of career maturity and psychological adjustment are also reported, with a discussion of the relationship of the empirical structure of the measure for the present data, to theoretical expectations. Such information is considered important since, to this writer's knowledge, the established measures used in the present research (Appendix IIC, and III B) have not been applied to a New Zealand sample of school leavers before. With regard to the measures of career maturity, the instrument from which these scales are drawn are considered a significant development for measuring career maturity (Lokan, 1984; Punch & Sheridon, 1985), and hence, has important potential for both research and practice in New Zealand. In this context, it is hoped that the information provided in Chapter Five will contribute to knowledge of the instrument's measurement characteristics for future use in New Zealand, in addition to information about accuracy of the measurement for the present data. (The characteristics of these measures are described in detail in the relevant sections in Chapter Four). Chapter Six summarises the results relating to (1) the present samples' career exploration experience; (ii) the relationship of career maturity to the clarity of career goals; and (iii) the relationship of career decidedness to psychological well-being and development (psychological adjustment). Finally, Chapter Seven presents the summary and conclusions, along with recommendations, arising out of this study, for future research.