

Action Research Report

Career Planning Beginning in Middle School

By: Lulu Chen

Educational Studies 480

Urban Education in Theory, Policy and Practice

Abstract

This action research paper addresses the issue of early preparation for college and career development. The study examined the influence of college planning and career planning lessons in a middle school ELL class. Two class periods was used to teach about the college application process and three class periods was used to teach about career opportunities. Students were required to do a final project displaying information about their career of interest. This paper seeks to analyze the influence of the career and college planning lessons on student attitudes towards pursuing higher education.

Introduction

It is well known that urban public schools are characterized by a major concentration of students from low-income and new immigrant families. Whether they are Caucasian, African, Hispanic or Asian, these students are constantly faced with challenges in their lives that consequently have an adverse effect on their educational progress. The external influence of gangs, drugs, abusive parents, broken families and economic instability all get brought into the school environment and negatively impacts a student's ability to attain a high school degree and a postsecondary degree. Urban schools disproportionately face challenges that include high dropout rates, low student attendance, low student achievement, funding problems and frequent changes in school leadership. All these issues combined make it more difficult for urban schools to produce graduates who are well prepared for post secondary training and for success beyond high school.

The school that I have selected to do my action research project is an alternative public school in a midwestern city and albeit founded on non-traditional principles, it is not spared from the trials and tribulations of education in an urban setting. Students are still plagued with the same problems faced by most urban schools, and even with graduation rates being higher than average, rates of enrollment in post-secondary education is still lagging behind those of their suburban counterparts.

Many of the students at this school realize that a college education is a valuable asset. It provides greater opportunities to pursue careers in professional fields with higher pay, such as business, computer science, teaching, and medicine. In spite of understanding the worth of having a college education, many students are not prepared to apply for colleges by the time they have reached their senior year in high school. Various factors contribute to their lack of preparation. For instance, taking classes that have not been challenging enough, no ACT or SAT scores, poor grades and insufficient funds. These mistakes for not being prepared for post-secondary education are not completely the fault of the student. Without the appropriate resources exposed to them in time, it is unlikely that the student will understand the processes involved in career and college planning.

Area of Focus Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of college and career planning in 7 and 8 graders at this alternative public school. I provided college and career planning materials to students. The information included the college planning process, career interests and what one could do to prepare oneself for career of their choice. Thus instead of learning all the information in their senior year, the students have some fundamental knowledge about the career and college planning process well before their senior year in high school.

Research Questions

In this investigation I sought to answer the following questions:

1. Have the students gained more knowledgeable about how to prepare for college after the lessons were taught?
2. How have student attitudes changed in regards to post-secondary education after understanding the college planning process?
3. After making the projects, have the students learned the relationship between the education required and their career of interest?
4. Are students more certain about the kind of careers they are interested in pursuing?

Review of Related Literature

Obtaining a college education has come to be a widely accepted goal and value among students today. By eighth grade, over 80% of students indicate that they will earn at least a college degree and nearly half also expect to earn a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Students indicate that they want to attend college and pursue careers in professional fields such as business, computer science, teaching, and medicine (U.S. Department of Education, 2003a). The desire to pursue a college education is reinforced as they progress through high school and learn about educational and career options. These educational and career goals are consistent across race, social class, gender, and student achievement level (Wimberly & Noeth, 2005).

With the replacement of an industrial economy by one based on service, information, and technology, the importance of advanced skills and credentials has dramatically increased. Many jobs now demand that workers have some postsecondary training. These changes in the U.S. economy, growing competition across the globe, and increasing demand for a skilled labor force have made postsecondary training essential. The earnings gap between college and high school graduates has changed in proportion to the labor and skill demands of the changing economy. In 1980 college graduates earned 19% more than those with a high school diploma. The earnings gap gradually increased, and by 1999 college graduates earned 58% more than high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 2003a). Recent high school graduates enter a labor market that mainly offers low skilled, low-wage, service-sector jobs with limited possibilities for advancement and stable employment.

Despite having ambitious educational and career aspirations, many students are lacking in basic information about how to fulfill their postsecondary goals. Students and their parents fail to plan since they do not have the resources, personal support networks, and structured programs needed to effectively perform educational and postsecondary planning activities (McClafferty, K.A., McDonough, P.M. & Nunez, A., 2002). Some students and their parents have a vague understanding or hold misconceptions about high school course requirements for college admission, the importance of teachers in college planning, and college tuition costs (McClafferty, K.A., McDonough, P.M. & Nunez, A., 2002). Although parents expect their children to continue with higher education and eventually obtain a professional career, many, particularly those who have not attended college, may not know the crucial steps for early postsecondary planning.

Middle school and high school are critical times for early postsecondary planning, and many educational organizations and the U.S. Department of Education recommend that students begin planning for college as early as sixth grade. This early planning provides students with the opportunity to take important middle and high school courses that will prepare them for postsecondary education. Schools can play a key role in guiding early preparation for postsecondary education through fostering academic preparation and achievement, supporting parent involvement, providing college and career planning information, and helping students through the many steps in postsecondary planning.

Data Collection Methods

To answer the questions of this investigation, I utilized a variety of sources including informal student and teacher interviews, student essays, student surveys and a final project produced by the student describing their career of interest. Prior to implementing the lesson plans, I briefly interviewed and discussed with my supervising teachers about student aspirations and student trends for after graduation. I also did a follow-up interview with the teachers to gather a sense of what they thought about the lessons. In my interviews with three of the students, I gathered information about the kinds of interests' students had and how such interests could complement future careers. I also questioned them about their plans for post-secondary education. In addition to student interviews, I read student essays about plans for after high school. The teacher assigned the essay question before I began my internship and I started my internship as the students were wrapping up the assignment.

The more formal part of the data collection came from student surveys. I provided a list of questions for students to answer before implementing the lessons and I had a follow-up survey after the lessons. The purpose of having the questionnaire before implementing the lessons was to gauge how much they knew about college planning. I also questioned the students on their attitudes about college planning and post-secondary education. In the follow-up survey, I looked for changes that occurred as a result of the intervention. The final data source I used as an evaluation was the final projects done by the students.

Student interviews – Casual interviews took place before the implementation of the lessons. The interviews sought to gauge general student interest in higher education, current interests and future aspirations. Interviews helped to determine what kinds of activities to do and how to do it in order to gain student interests.

Student essays – Before delving further into the study I read student essays to learn about what students had planned for after high school. This was another source of student information to learn about what motivates the students and what kinds of expectations they had for themselves.

Surveys – Students completed a 5 point likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) survey before the career planning lessons and after the end of the lessons. These surveys provided a clearer view of their experiences and knowledge regarding the topic of study. In the follow-up surveys, they reflected on what they had learned from the lessons and its application to future plans.

Teacher interviews – Informal teacher interviews were conducted throughout the research study. Most of the responses from the teacher interviews were to

determine students' reactions to the project, whether it was too difficult of a lesson or not. Teacher suggestions on how to implement the lessons were very useful since I was unfamiliar with the students levels in English.

Final projects – Students did a final project on a career of interest. The format of the project was open ended; they could make posters, do a song, write an essay, etc. The only requirement for the project was to present all the information that was researched in their career search (see Appendix II). This was a more formal evaluation of how much the students had learned from the lessons.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

After analyzing the questionnaires, student responses demonstrated an increased interest in achieving higher education. Responses revealed a positive impact on the students as ratings for questions related to higher education planning increased (see Appendix I). Student responses revealed more consideration for pursuing higher education and the planning that is involved. Overall, the lesson plans seemed to have been successful in generating thoughts on college planning and career planning.

Feedback from the teachers was also positive. Both teachers were very enthusiastic about the lessons. They saw the benefits in educating the students early and were very helpful in assisting with the lessons. From talking to them, I gathered that many of the students do get to pursue higher education, however they don't typically strive for four-year degrees at a university or college. It is more common for students to continue their education at a vocational school or a community college. Seeing that former students do continue with higher education, the younger students may be influenced to pursue post-secondary education as well.

One key question that is worth noting is the question regarding a person whom students could turn to for college planning. It is interesting to note that student ratings dropped for this question, implying that they are not certain about a key person to whom they can address their college related questions. For most of the students, the main source of support in their college planning process is their advisor, a teacher who acts as an advocate for student issues, family liaisons, and learning plan facilitators. Although most teachers are familiar with college planning, they may not necessarily have access to the multitude of resources that a counselor has. Furthermore, with only one counselor for the entire school of roughly 400 students, it is difficult for the counselor to develop a strong relationship with the students. Without the personal attention, applying to college can be an arduous task that easily discourages students.

In the final project, students displayed the information that they had learned about their ideal job. The purpose of the final project was to provide students with a concrete example of how education would play a role in their lives and future careers. Before investigating a career of interest, students were given a simplified version of the Holland vocational assessment to determine their personality types. Using the results from this assessment, they looked up corresponding careers that were compatible with their personality type. From the list of occupations, they selected one to do further research. All the information was gathered from *MnCareers*, an annual career exploration publication for students and jobseekers. Once they had found all the information that I had designated, they were given free reign to present the information however way they wished. There was no guideline to evaluate the project; the only requirement was for them to present the answers to the following questions (see Appendix II).

In the questionnaire given after the project, student responses showed that even though they found the lesson plan interesting, they were still uncertain about what they wanted to do. This is a reasonable answer as they are still exploring and learning about their own interests.

Ultimately, these middle school students do seem to pursue some kind of higher education. However, because they are not as prepared as some of their other peers at private schools or schools with more resources, they take a little longer to continue with post-secondary education. Moreover, because students have limited opportunity to explore careers and colleges or universities, having such a goal does not cross their minds until later. Thus, exposing the students earlier to the idea of going to college and aiming for a career is ideal for attaining higher education. Planning early is always better than planning late.

Action Plan

In reviewing the process and the results of the study, I've observed changes that I could implement for the future:

- *Implement the lesson in middle school.* As I have mentioned earlier, planning early is always better than waiting until high school. By preparing students earlier in middle school, they can at least be aware of the variety of options that are available for them. What's more, students will then be prepared for the demands of college admissions that begin in high school. For example, taking the appropriate classes and participating in community service activities. They will be able to have more time to investigate options and to make the best choice for themselves.
- *Provide a longer period for the implementation of lessons.* Having inundated the students with so much information in such a short time span, a lot of the information probably was not retained. It would be a better curriculum if there were at least a month's time to teach the lessons. By providing enough time for the lessons, there would be more instances to make sure that students were understanding the material and developing more sensitivity for the issue.
- *Obtain results from a longitudinal perspective.* As I had mentioned previously, the action research was conducted over a span of two weeks, which is a very short time to validate any kind of significant effect. Although changes were noted, it is unknown whether the changes were temporary or permanent. Various external factors could have affected student response on the questionnaire (e.g. mood for the day, motivation for the day, or social interactions with other individuals). Thus a longitudinal study would provide more reliable results.
- *Incorporate the use of technology.* Currently, a multitude of resources exist on the World Wide Web, however students are unaware of the resources simply because no one has informed them about it. If students had increased access to the computer lab and they were provided with a list of websites where they could learn more about college planning and career planning, they would probably gain a lot from utilizing the Internet. Even if they don't yet understand the materials on the websites, at least they are at an advantage because they know that such sources exist and they can easily acquire the material provided that they have Internet access.
- *Utilize a wider range of teaching materials to engage students.* Not only is the Internet a source for conveying the materials to the students, but guest speakers, videos, job shadowing, or college visits can be great ways to communicate the message that pursuing higher education is important. Because each student learns differently and have different strengths,

adapting the lessons to accommodate those abilities enhances the learning process.

- *Encourage advising teachers to collaborate more closely with the school counselor.* One of the most important resources for college preparation is the school counselor. However, because the school counselor is frequently busy and unable to meet individually with all the students, his/her role as a counselor becomes less useful. Thus instead of having students directly speak to the counselor to discuss college preparatory plans, the counselor can collaborate with the teachers to inform students of current information on opportunities related to college and career planning. Teachers will thus serve as the intermediary between students and the counselor.

Final Thoughts

Through my research and the implementation of my instructional design, I truly believe that urban public school students would benefit a lot from learning about college preparation and career planning early in their education. By an early age, these students are already facing numerous problems in their everyday lives and as they continue their education farther into high school, their mindset becomes even more embedded in pessimism and dismay. Their sources for support become limited and their motivation to improve their lives wanes. The overarching goal for providing these resources to disadvantaged students is so that they may achieve higher education, a better career and eventually an improved quality of life. They should know that there are choices in life and that they are not exceptions; they can also obtain higher education if they so desire.

The findings of the action research are promising, as they indicate a positive impact on student perceptions for choices about their futures. However, as I had mentioned before, since this study was conducted over a brief two-week period, we cannot consider the results of this action research to be legitimate findings. We can interpret these findings mainly as a positive go ahead for future research. In future studies, it would be important to conduct them over a longer period of time in order to investigate the student's development. Also, it would be important to focus on when the schools should begin educating students to prepare them for college and what kinds of materials should be presented. There are various avenues that future research can take in order to better understand this situation and I believe that this research is essential because of the changing workforce and the rapidly developing economy.

Annotated Bibliography

McClafferty, K.A., McDonough, P.M., & Nunez, A. (2002). *What is college culture? Facilitating college preparation through organizational change*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

This paper presents guidelines for creating a school environment in which college is a reasonable expectation for all students. Drawing from the research literature and lessons learned from more than 4 years of partnership work between a public research university and a cluster of urban K-12 schools, the paper outlines a set of conditions that are consistent with the creation of a "college culture." Examples are included to show how these conditions affect the middle school and high school levels, and the paper concludes with reflection on the process of cultural change. Nine principles have been identified as essential for such a culture: (1) college talk; (2) clear expectations; (3) information and resources; (4) comprehensive counseling model; (5) testing and curriculum; (6) faculty involvement; (7) family involvement; (8) college partnerships; and (9) articulation.

U.S. Department of Education. (2002). *Coming of age in the 1990's: The eighth grade class of 1988 12 years later*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

This report is an examination of the eighth-grade cohort 1988 in the year 2000. It presents findings from the fourth follow-up survey of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). The follow-up was conducted in 2000, the year when most eighth-grade cohort members turned 26.

U.S. Department of Education. (2003a). *The condition of education 2003*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

The Condition of Education summarizes important developments and trends in education using the latest available data. The indicators represent a consensus of professional judgment on the most significant national measures of the condition and progress of education for which accurate data are available. The 2003 print edition includes 44 indicators in six main areas: (1) enrollment trends and student characteristics at all levels of the education system from elementary education to adult learning; (2) student achievement and the longer term, enduring effects of education; (3) student effort and rates of progress through the educational system among different population groups; (4) the contexts of elementary and secondary education in terms of courses taken, teacher characteristics, and other factors; (5) the contexts of postsecondary education; and (6) societal support for learning, including parental and community support for learning, and public and private financial support of education at all levels. This edition also includes a special analysis on the reading achievement and classroom experiences of kindergarteners and 1st graders.

Wimberly, G.L. & Noeth, R.J. (2005). *College readiness begins in middle school: ACT policy report*. American College Testing ACT Inc. (ERIC document Reproduction Service No. ED483849)

This study presents an analysis of the critical issues affecting the preparation and experience of students pursuing post-secondary education. The study examined the extent of early exploration and planning in certain college readiness areas. It also explored the issue of how parents, school staff and school experience help students with their early educational planning. The report's findings from a survey and focus group discussions with middle and early high school students demonstrated how people and school-based factors helped shape students' educational and post-secondary planning. Students in this study were from 15 schools in 6 school districts (Chicago, Charleston, West Virginia, Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Oklahoma).

Appendix I

5 = Strongly Agree
2 = Disagree

4 = Agree

3 = Neutral

1 = Strongly Disagree

		Before	After
1.	I plan to go to college.	3.6	4.6
2.	I want to go to college.	3.8	4.4
3.	I know what I need to do to get to college.	3	3.4
4.	I have thought about what I need to do in school to prepare for college.	3.2	3.6
5.	I am already taking classes and participating in activities that will prepare me for college.	3.4	2
6.	I know what kind of a school I want to attend.	2.2	3.2
7.	I know someone who can help me in my college planning.	3.6	3.4
8.	I understand the benefits of going to college.	2.8	3.6
9.	I have thought about what I want to do when I go to college.	3	4
10.	I worry that I won't be able to afford a college education immediately after high school.	3.6	3
11.	The kind of career I want to pursue doesn't require a post-secondary education.	3.4	2.8

Additional questions posed after the implementation of the instructional design Average

11.	The career planning lessons have helped me better understand what I want to do.	3.4
12.	The career planning lessons were interesting.	4.1
13.	I still have no idea what I want to do after high school.	2.1
14.	I don't want to continue with higher education.	1.4
15.	I understand the benefits of going to college.	4.1

Appendix II
(Interest Inventory Worksheet/Guidelines for final project)

Name: _____

Below are descriptions for each interest code. Read the descriptions for the codes in your interest profile.

--	--	--

Realistic people are often good at mechanical or athletic jobs. They like to work with things, like machines, tools or plants, and they like to work with their hands. They are often practical and good at solving problems.

Investigative people like to watch, learn, analyze and solve problems. They often like to work independently, tend to be good at math and science and enjoy analyzing data.

Artistic people like to work in unstructured situations where they can use their creativity and come up with new ideas. They enjoy performing (theater or music) and visual arts.

Social people like to work directly with people rather than things. They enjoy training, instructing, counseling or curing others. They are often good public speakers with helpful, empathetic personalities.

Enterprising people like to work with other people; they particularly enjoy influencing, persuading and performing. They like to lead and tend to be assertive and enthusiastic.

Conventional people are very detail-oriented and like to work with data. They have good organizational and numerical abilities and are good at following instructions. Conventional people also like working in structured situations.

http://www.iseek.org/mncareers/start_exploring/interestassessment.htm

Interest codes:

3 occupations of interest:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Most interesting occupation:

About the occupation that I am researching...

Occupation title:

What do you do on the job? What are the responsibilities?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What is the salary?

What are three high school classes that I will need for this job?

(You won't find answers to these on the website, you need to come up with your own ideas)

After high school, what kind of education will I need to prepare for this job?

(For example: to be a carpenter I will need to do an apprenticeship; to be a social worker I will need at least a bachelor's degree)

What kind of skills do I need for the job?

(For example: to be a photographer, I need discipline to practice and develop new projects, creativity to uniquely express my own art form, and persistence to stick to my dreams especially when the competition is tough)

Appendix IV
(College planning worksheets)

ASSESSMENTS

When applying to colleges, an unavoidable part of the application packet is your standardized test scores. Because so many students from across the nation and across the world compete to get into a particular school, the school needs to use some kind of criteria to judge whether a particular student is prepared for the academic rigor of the school. As a result, schools use standardized test scores. Standardized test scores are taken very seriously and it is something to seriously consider for all student who wish to pursue higher education. Early preparation can really help in doing well on it.

In your research you will try to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What is the _____?
2. What kinds of subjects are included in the test?
3. When should a student take the test?
4. How does a student prepare for the test?

<p>PSAT</p>	<p>SAT</p>
<p>PLAN</p>	<p>ACT</p>

FINANCIAL AID

Going to college is an investment in your future. It is a way to gain independence and to get the skills and education you need for a good career. There is no doubt that the cost of attendance can be very high for some schools, but that doesn't mean that you can't still go to that school! You may not be able to pay the whole amount, but there are forms of financial aid that can help cover a large proportion of the costs so that you can afford the institution of your choice.

In your research, you will find answers to the following questions:

What is merit based and need-based financial aid?

Merit based:

Need based:

Now that you understand the basic categories of financial aid, research about the four main types of aid that fall into these two broader categories.

1. Describe the kind of financial aid.
2. Do you have to pay back the money for this kind of financial aid?
3. One other interesting fact that people should know about this kind of aid.
4. Give two names for each kind of financial aid (work study is an exception; it has no specific name)

Scholarships	Grants
Loans	Work study

CERTIFICATES & DEGREES

When you complete your education, you will generally get some kind of degree or certificate stating that you have completed your studies. A degree or certificate also shows that you have the knowledge and skills to perform in that specialized area. Nowadays, many employers look for people who have had some kind of formal education before they will hire them for particular jobs. The main reason for doing so is because people who have had formal education tend to be more knowledgeable about the job and have the appropriate skills to perform the job. For example, you wouldn't want to have a surgeon operate on you if he/she hasn't gone through medical school would you? Thus, getting a degree is very important in helping you get the kind of job you would like.

In your research, you will try to find answers to the following questions:

1. What does it mean to have a(n) _____?
2. What kind of school does a person attend if they have a(n) _____? (2-4 year college/university, community college, technical schools, etc.)
3. How long does it take to get the degree?
4. Provide 2 examples of professions that require such a degree.

Associates Degree	Master's Degree
Bachelor's Degree	Doctoral Degree

HIGHER EDUCATION

The term “college” is often used to describe most types of education following high school. In this assignment, you and your partner(s) will research about and learn that in fact, after high school there are a variety of post-secondary options that doesn't necessarily mean only college. Each higher education option offers a unique way to meet your needs.

In your research you will try to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is a _____?
2. Who attends this kind of school?
3. What kinds of programs do they offer?
4. How many years does it take to graduate?
5. Provide 2 examples of each kind of school in Minnesota.

Technical college

Private colleges and universities

Public/State Universities

Community college

