

Exploring community strategies to career education in terms of the asset-based approach: expanding existing career theory and models of intervention

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In this article we explore a rural community's strategies for career education from the asset-based approach in order to expand on existing career theory and models of intervention. In a qualitative case study exploring a community's expectations of career education, one of the themes that emerged from four focus group interviews was possible intervention strategies for career education. The stakeholders' suggestions of community-based resources, career education skills training and networking are discussed. Subsequently it is debated that these can be explained from the theoretical framework of the asset-based approach. The asset-based approach is illustrated by means of this case study. Examples of how the asset-based approach could stretch career theory and models of intervention are proposed. It is concluded that parallels exist between the asset-based approach and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) with regard to career education. In conclusion it is recommended that further research should focus on expounding the links between IKS and career theory as a means to document new and critical career development theories and counseling approaches.

Introduction

Internationally there have been calls for research exploring "new and critical issues in career development and career counseling" (Carter, 2003:250). These new and critical issues are explicated in terms of their integration of scholarship and research from various domains. The focus of these scholarly endeavours should have as outcome an expansion of current theories and models of career intervention (McMahon, Patton, Watson: 2003). In this article the authors aim to present an innovative career intervention strategy integrating educational, psychological and community theory and practice.

The quest for exploring and describing practices has also been brought to the forefront nationally in terms of the research programme for Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) (Higgs & van Niekerk, 2002). This study falls within the IKS focus area of socio-cultural systems. As such the central thesis of the article deals with the manner in which indigenous communities are balancing systems of career, education, learning and culture.

As theoretical framework for the study the authors have chosen to utilise premises of the asset-based approach. In previous studies (Ebersöhn, 2003; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2003; Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2001) the asset-based approach was successfully linked to indigenous knowledge systems. However, no other studies exist in which the domain of career psychology and the asset-based approach have been linked. As such the authors were intrigued if a community's response to career education could be linked with the asset-based approach. And, if this was the case how could this knowledge expand on existing career theory and models of intervention?

Thus this article aims to explore community-based strategies for career education in order to evaluate these trends against premises of an asset-based approach to development. The article flows from a qualitative enquiry into a South African rural community's career education perceptions and expectations (Mbetse, 2002). The questions directing this study are as follows: What are community-based strategies to career education? How do these strategies correspond with the premises of an asset-based approach? How can these insights be utilised to enhance existing career theory and models of intervention? In the following section the focus will fall on conceptualization and the theoretical framework.

Conceptualisation and theoretical framework

In this section the core concepts in the study will be explicated. The authors conceptualise career education as formal and informal opportunities for people to acquire skills, attitudes and competencies with regards to career development. The outcome of career education

would be career maturity and preparedness to enter the world of work. Community strategies are defined as plans and activities initiated from within communities to address challenges in career education. As such, community responses are viewed as indigenous knowledge systems to address career education.

The asset-based approach

The asset-based approach is an alternative to the needs driven approach (Emmett, 2000). The asset-based approach focuses on the capacities, skills and social resources of people and their communities. The point of departure is what the community has, rather than what it does not have. The core is potential and ways the existing potential can be directed towards available opportunities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996; Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2001).

The asset-based approach does not ignore that communities have problems and deficiencies, nor does it imply that these communities do not need additional resources from outside. However it suggests that external resources can be more effectively utilised if the community has already mobilised its own resources and defined the agendas for the utilisation of external resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Emmett, 2000; Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2001).

Eloff (2003) argues that the obvious advantages of the asset-based approach are ownership, shared responsibility, immediacy, relevancy and practicality of solutions, flexibility, mutual support and a caring environment, as well as individual capacity building. Some of the key characteristics of the asset-based approach to intervention include: (i) a strong belief in and focus on the presence of assets and capabilities; (ii) enablement and self-determination; (iii) building relationships and creating networks for collaboration and partnerships; and (iv) a belief in and focus on internal creativity, control and power.

The asset-based approach is not only theory, but also includes dynamic strategies for intervention. The mapping of resources is such a function (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). According to this method an inventory of the knowledge, skills and talents of individuals and households, as well as those of the associations, networks and institutions that exist in the community are made. Community assets assessment can occur on three levels (Ammerman & Parks, 1998:34; Snow, 2001; Eloff, 2003). In Table 1 a brief description of each level is presented.

The mere identification of assets would however be insignificant if not translated into action. Accordingly, after identification and awareness of assets, cooperative relations are initiated between individuals, associations and institutions. Strategies proposed to utilise asset maps are numerous. People with complementary skills can be

Table 1 Levels of community assets assessment

Community assets assessment level	Description
Individual capacity inventory	Involves specific capacities, skills, talents and experiences of stakeholders Identification of the richness of personal resources that can be mobilised Examples: actual work experience, volunteer work or life experience
Inventory of local associations and organisations	Resources that may contribute to the solution of problems Could be formal or informal Examples: support groups, church groups, youth groups, political groups, businesses or sport organisations
Inventory of local institutions	May contribute resources in terms of materials and services Examples: libraries, schools, hospitals, human service agencies, banks, parks and community centres

linked for new endeavours, local employers can be availed of skills in the local community, skills can be utilised for training and teaching community members, as well as enhancing community organisations. Another asset-based strategy is to identify, activate and link local associations and formal institutions (Emmett, 2000).

The role of the professional in the asset-based approach is that of helping the community to realise, appreciate and utilise their talents and assets. Professionals supply information not readily available, establish social support and networks. They also forge linkages to access funding to enable communities. The power and control regarding funds remain within the community to be used according to their own priorities (Mokwena, 1997). In these ways professionals encourage local leadership and reduce service boundaries.

This discussion served as a brief outline of some characteristics of the asset-based approach. Subsequently the study will be contextualised.

Contextual background to the study

Driven by a growing awareness of and concern over increased local unemployment, and dropouts, as well as limited employment opportunities, a rural community consortium¹ was mandated to explore and implement career education strategies. This community's dilemma and addressing thereof is not unique. Other national studies targeting the South African youth also found challenges in providing career education (Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2000; HJ Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000). Community participation and enablement regarding community development have come more to the fore regionally, but also in a global context (Chen, 2003; Stivens, 1994; Donahue, 2002; Emmet, 2000; Germann, 2002; Salie, 1994). An increasing interest in strategies to promote community participation as a means of enhancing the development process results from deepening poverty, as well as socio-economic debilitating factors such as HIV/AIDS, illiteracy and unemployment (Unemployment in South Africa, 2000).

Career education has always been viewed as a means of addressing at least some of these (Savickas & Walsh, 1996; Hickson & White, 1989; Mathabe & Temane, 1993; Maree & Ebersöhn, 2002). The theoretical assumption of career development is that the acquisition of the cornerstones of career maturity (self-knowledge, career knowledge and decision-making capacity) equips one with the capacity to make sound career choices (Super, 1957; Super, Savickas & Super, 1996; Heidema, Nel & Fourie, 1993; Kotze, 1993). As in other developing countries (Chen, 2003), the realisation of these basic

assumptions is more complex in South Africa.

The context in which career maturity is attained (and career education occurs) serves as an external reality involving variables such as gender, culture, socio-economic circumstances and literacy (Stead, 1996; Naicker, 1994; De Bruin, 1999). Mbetse (2002) found that learners in a Limpopo rural community lacked career maturity. Furthermore, many learners drop out of school, many are unemployed and access to career information is limited. Subsequently on a theoretical level these learners' career choice capacity would be compromised.

Historically the provision of career education in South Africa has been riddled with inequality (Akhurst & Mkize, 1999; Cross, Mkhwanazi-Twala & Klein, 1998; De Bruin & Nel, 1996; Stead & Watson, 1998). Career education was only introduced into black schools in 1981 following the Soweto uprisings of 1976. During this time multiple Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) implemented various programmes to address the dearth of career education provision (Akhurst & Mkize, 1999). Various studies indicate that general career education challenges are that of limited access to career education services, little exposure to the world of work and a dearth of knowledge regarding tertiary institutions (Mtolo, 1996; Akhurst & Mkhize, 1999; Ntshangase, 1995).

The present landscape of career education is complex. Career education is addressed in the fundamental learning area Life Orientation (Orsmond, 2002; Department of Education, 1997). This learning area also encompasses physical education, religious education, health education and lifeskills. As a fundamental learning area, Life Orientation foci have to be addressed by all learning areas as part of the specific curriculum for those areas (although not assessed as specific outcomes). Five specific outcomes (SOs) of the learning area Life Orientation are to be addressed and assessed by specialist educators. Career education is represented in one of the SOs where the focus of lifeskills development falls on the world of work (Orsmond, 2002).

In order to equip educators to meet the challenge of such an integrated curriculum in-service training was mandated (Department of Education, 2000). Educators have been involved in HIV/AIDS and lifeskills in-service training (Department of Education, 2001). However, this plan to develop an education and training system scarcely focuses on career education. Currently it would seem that career education activities occur not on a national level, but on an *ad hoc* provincial and even district level (Coetzee, 2002; Roux, 2002).

The current career education scenario is further complicated by the suspension of guidance as auxiliary service. Specialists appointed by the Department of Education no longer directly assess and evaluate individual learners. Due to the vast number of learners involved in the schooling system these specialists now train educators to assist learners in an informal way to make career choices (Roux, 2002). Schools have been creative in addressing this career guidance and counselling gap. NGOs still play a leading role in providing some of these services to under-resourced schools. Bailanis (2001) found that schools with sufficient financial resources have outsourced career education services to private practitioners.

Educators in the Limpopo rural community Mbetse (2002) studied, feel they lack expertise in presenting career education content. The limited number of trained educators and the allocation of Life Orientation to any educators with time slots to be filled further compromised career education. Stakeholders mentioned that their community schools are understaffed and available staff overstretched in providing career education: "we are experiencing problems at the moment because we are too few staffed with few teachers and we cannot give career guidance to all grades any longer because we are too full." Similar findings were echoed in studies located in other regions of South Africa (Benjamin, 1995; Naicker, 1994).

Mbetse (2002) also found that educators in the community he studied felt that the training and support they received from the Department of Education provided them with information, but not skills to utilise these in providing career education: "We have lots of talks and there is material, but I do not believe I am the one to say that

¹ An author, DJM, is also a founder member of this consortium.

this is your personality, these are your interests and this is your aptitude. I do not have the qualifications for that".

This then portrays the scenario in which a Limpopo rural community decided to explore the development of an intervention strategy for career education.

A case study exploring the development of an intervention strategy for career education

This case study was situated within a Limpopo rural community. Its population exceeds that of 850 000, with 30% of the population constituting Mozambican refugees (Tollman, 1995). The region has a high incidence of poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS and orphans (Health Systems Development Unit, 2000; Mbetse, 2002).

A qualitative case study design (Stake in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was chosen to explore the development of an intervention strategy for career education. A qualitative approach was chosen because it was not known what would be found. Furthermore rich descriptions of stakeholders' expectations of career education needed to be captured for credible themes to emerge in data analysis (Morse & Field, 1996). The case study as strategy for enquiry was selected as it best suits the objective of exploring, describing and interpreting this community's expectation of and suggestions for career education (Neumann, 1994).

Four focus group interviews were conducted with stakeholders. This method was deemed appropriate for an exploratory study aimed at generating new ideas, strategies and hypotheses (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 1998; Vaughn, Shay-Shumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Community stakeholders were purposefully selected. Selection was based on the intention to explore and understand their expectations regarding career education. The stakeholders were selected as participants as they were deemed the most appropriate sources to generate rich descriptions encompassing several arenas within the community. Stakeholders who participated were parents, important community figures, psychological division officials, career guidance educators and learners.

Guba's (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) model of trustworthiness was used in this study. The truth-value of the findings was monitored by continually referring interpretations, integrations and emerged themes to participants for scrutiny. Participants thus enhanced the truth-value of the data analysis and interpretation. Previously it was mentioned that similar challenges exist in other South African and international communities. Furthermore it was indicated that various communities choose to address these challenges in a community-based manner. Therefore, regarding the applicability of the study it is proposed that the asset-based approach could benefit career education interventions in other communities as well. The consistency of the data was high as monitored in the data analysis and interpretation processes. The primary researcher being a community and consortium member (mandated by said community to do the study) compromises the neutrality of the study. To obviate this he reflected on his personal biases, perspectives and motivations.

Strategies were implemented to direct ethical conduct. The privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were ensured. Participation was voluntary and all participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the research — both verbally and in writing.

Transcriptions of the focus groups served as platform for a combination of open-ended and deductive, structured analysis (Creswell, 1998). Major categories were identified and defined. Initial open-ended coding was followed by a rigorous coding-recording procedure. Finally the thematic results were written into a theoretical framework. Two main themes emerged of which one (possible interventions for career education) forms the focus of this article.²

Theme: Possible intervention strategies for career education

Sub themes of the emerged theme under discussion were (i) commu-

nity-based resources, (ii) career education skills training, and (iii) networking.

Community-based resources

Stakeholders identified existing resources that could be mobilised for career education purposes. In this regard a list of organisations was compiled based on the transcriptions of the focus groups.

Although it seems superfluous to list, the consortium that initiated this study can be cited as a core resource in providing career education. This consortium resulted spontaneously from the community in order to address community challenges. Previously it succeeded in partnership with the Community Health Department of the University of the Witwatersrand in addressing sexual and reproductive health issues. Stakeholders in the consortium constitute a multidisciplinary team of educators, traditional healers, health professionals, clergy, peace officials, social workers and community leaders. As such plans and decisions regarding career education would carry the weight of these representatives' varied status amongst community members. Members in the consortium have experience in presenting workshops, referring individuals and even in providing basic counseling services. These could be extended to include the field of career education once a member has been trained, or a trained individual in the community has been identified.

The stakeholders also identified an active youth-targeted NGO as a resource. Well-maintained basketball courts and soccer fields serve as an attraction to community youth. For many the NGO centre serves as primary source for career information — stocked in a rudimentary career information library. Volunteers and NGO staff members currently also provide basic career counseling services — although these are reserved for youth only as stipulated by the NGO guidelines. Other services include that of sexual and reproductive health counselling, HIV/AIDS testing and counseling, as well as life-skills workshops. Another core resource of the NGO centre is its computers equipped with career education software as well as Internet access.

Career education skills training

The stakeholders were in unison regarding the provision of skills training as career education strategy. Skills they identified as being necessary in this regard were goal setting and decision-making. Another recommendation they had in this regard was that learners should be equipped with these skills from an early age.

Networking

Networking was also identified as career education strategy. Networking with community schools was deemed crucial in successfully providing career education. The nature of the networking could be explored further. Informed educators who already received Department of Education in-service training regarding Life Orientation could volunteer their expertise at the consortium's centre. Likewise, the computers at the NGO centre could be made accessible to various schools. Another possibility could be that unemployed community members may attend some of the school-based Life Orientation classes in order to enhance their career maturity.

Furthermore, the stakeholders were of the opinion that closer linkages should be forged between institutions of higher education and community schools, the consortium and the NGO. The purpose would be to inform community members regarding available courses, funding, and entrance requirements and boarding facilities.

In the next section a purpose of this article, namely to align the asset-based approach with community strategies for career education, will be brought to the fore.

Linking the asset-based approach to the community's response

In the following discussion the proposed strategies for career education as being asset-based are discussed. This discussion indicates that asset-based premises are reflected in indigenous knowledge systems with regard to career education. Right from the first community

² The other theme was: limitations in existing career education practices. Sub-themes were: lack of self knowledge; lack of career knowledge; lack of expertise in providing career educations; no career guidance support at school-based level.

initiative, asset-based nuances were present. The Limpopo local community identified a challenge (career education provision), sought appropriate resources in the community (consortium) and mobilised these in an effort to meet the challenge (consortium member undertakes study). This serves as an example of how existing potential within the community was directed towards opportunities at their disposal.

Previously the community took ownership of another socio-economic reality (sexual and reproductive health). Community members were identified and formally organised in terms of a consortium. In this they demonstrated responsibility for their community development. Based on their previous successes, the consortium also indicated confidence and enablement in launching their new project concerning career education. This capacity building has also stretched to individual community members. Some have become volunteers at the NGO, others have been trained to do basic counselling and another has gained research capacity.

This community's choices of enterprises are further indicative of immediacy and relevancy. At the core of their lives are the realities of poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS. In seeking solutions for sexual and reproductive health, as well as career education the consortium wishes to strike at the heart of what exists socio-economically.

Instead of the community playing victim to negativities, they chose to mobilise themselves as mutually supportive and caring change agents. Their approach to career education is not that of passively complaining and waiting for the government to save them. The control and power for their career education initiatives and solutions are internally situated. The strategies they proposed for career education focus on available organisations, enablement by means of lifeskills training, and the use of networks.

The last illustrates a pillar of the asset-based approach: building relationships through networking. The stakeholders were eloquent in describing the benefits of collaboration between identified individuals, organisations and systems in enhancing career education. Without prior asset-based knowledge the stakeholders demonstrated insight by acknowledging the advantages of linking with formal institutions (higher education institutions, schools, faith-based organisations) for career education purposes.

Expanding existing career theory and models of intervention

In this section it is argued that knowledge of the asset-based approach could expand existing career theory and models of intervention. This study indicates that parallels exist between the asset-based approach and chosen indigenous knowledge systems with regards to career education. As such the authors propose that incorporating premises of the asset-based approach can build career theory. In line with this proposal flows the recommendation for further research to ground this statement.

Cognisance of the asset-based approach in career theory can support practitioners and community partners in the integration and implementation of their proposed strategies for career education. Accordingly a community capacity inventory, as well as individual capacity inventories can be mapped. These can build on resources identified by the stakeholders, such as the community consortium and NGOs.

Besides the consortium and NGO as resources, each individual participating in these organisations are resources in themselves. Their wealth of knowledge could include knowledge of possible institutions for referral, contextual career knowledge regarding their world-of-work, training opportunities, as well as experience and skills relating to decision making and implementing. After their individual assets have been mapped, they can be mobilised in terms of career education training workshops facilitated by specific individuals.

Naturally according to the tenets of the asset-based approach, not only consortium members have capabilities. Under the leadership of consortium members the mapping of various community members' capacities can be undertaken. Some of these people could also par-

ticipate in facilitating the workshop-like lifeskills training. For example, the experience of a grandmother's problem-solving skills can be work shopped with youth; the goal setting skills of a subsistence farmer can serve as a model for others.

As part of the community inventory map existing structures would also be noted. Accordingly the consortium provides its services from centrally located community offices. Other community structures identified are those of the school, the faith-based organisation and a NGO. These offices could in future be utilised for various career education endeavours: as a place for meeting and planning; a central locality where career education information can be accessed; a point where volunteers can refer learners to identified career services.

Specialists in career education, guidance and counselling could support the career education strategies by supplying career information not readily available. These specialists could also establish support and networks. Thus the Department of Labour could train volunteers in career education skills, such as job seeking skills. Subsequently volunteers could facilitate community-based lifeskills training.

Conclusion

In the discussion of this case study it was established that asset-based characteristics exist in a community's endeavours to develop career education. The authors are left with many intriguing questions and hypotheses for future research. Foremost in the authors' minds is the question of whether or not the asset-based approach has roots within indigenous knowledge regarding community education and development which reach beyond the strata of career education. Why did this South African community utilise strategies similar to those coined by theorists and practitioners demographically vastly different from themselves? What is the effect of globalisation on communities' preferred approaches for development? Did this community choose strategies based on indigenous knowledge systems? If so, what is the nature of these systems and how are they utilised? Or is their self-mobilisation approach a reaction to historical inequalities in the provision of career education? Do their efforts compliment policymakers' attempts towards sustained community development? Or are their efforts a mirror of self-directed communities initiating action in lieu of sufficient formal intervention?

The authors assume that this article touches on merely a fraction of the phenomenon of asset-based approaches in communities addressing challenges in education. By exploring, describing and explaining similar community actions an indigenous asset-based approach could be conceptualised. The authors support the construction of contextually relevant theory (be it in the field of career education or community intervention) to portray a multiplicity of approaches, constructs and interventions appropriate to South Africa. For the authors contextually relevant theory would constitute a fusion between knowledge generated in South Africa with those constructed in other international contexts.

In the scholarly quest for innovation in career education and counselling internationally, this study presents an innovative means of approaching career theory and intervention acknowledging indigenous knowledge systems.

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