Introduction to Special Issue on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development

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The reasons for creating this special issue devoted to evidence-based practice in career development came from two sources, one external to our profession and the other internal. The external pressure came from the two international symposiums on career development and public policy, hosted by Canada in 1999 (Hiebert & Bezanson, 2000) and 2001 (Bezanson & O'Reilly, 2002). During the dialogue between policy makers and service providers at the second symposium, an interesting phenomenon was observed. Policy makers claimed that their primary motivation was client welfare and lamented that often practitioners did not understand the intent of policy and ended up being barriers to the successful implementation of policy. On the other hand, practitioners claimed that their primary motivation was client welfare and lamented that often policy interfered with the provision of quality services to clients. Basically, each group claimed to be acting in the best interest of clients, and saw the other group as interfering with their ability to provide quality services. Policy makers also pointed out that they wanted to engage in evidence-based policy development, but, for the most part, the evidence base regarding the efficacy of career development interventions was too sparse to be used as the basis for policy development.

The lament about the inadequacy of efficacy evidence for career development interventions is closely related to two interrelated themes unfolding in the counselling field, namely evidence-based practice and outcome-focused intervention. At the centre of evidence-based practice is the belief that clients deserve to have more well-founded reasons for embarking on a chosen intervention than the service providers' hunch that a particular intervention would be appropriate. At the centre of outcome-focused intervention is the belief that the interventions that clients receive should result in demonstrable indicators of success, or outcomes. Pulling these two themes together results in the suggestions that service providers should be interacting in a purposeful manner with clients; they should be documenting what they do to promote client change; they should be documenting the observable indicators of change; and they should be looking for emerging patterns that suggest a link between certain types of interventions implemented with certain types of clients, and certain types of outcomes. This is what Trierweiler & Stricker (1998) call a *local clinical scientist*, and that way of operating has the potential to provide policy makers with the type of evidence base they are looking for in order to engage in evidence-based policy development.

The matter of the adequacy of the evidence base in career development came to the forefront in the 2003 Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy, when policy makers stated that they were warm to providing funding for career development services, but that the field had not yet made the case that providing such funding would be a worthwhile investment. "Show me the evidence" became a prominent theme at the Pan-Canadian symposium. Rather than continue the lament and mutual blaming, a group of researchers from six Canadian universities decided to pool their expertise in an attempt to develop a model for evaluating career development services in Canada. The group is currently known as the Canadian Research Working Group on Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG). This special issue is devoted to outlining the work of the CRWG and providing some examples of research and program development that illustrate approaches to demonstrating the value of career development services.

The CRWG first undertook to assess the current state of practice regarding the evaluation of career development services in Canada. A national survey was conducted to find out from practitioners, agency managers, and employers how much priority they placed on evaluation. One striking finding was that although all groups of respondents agreed that evaluation was important, people seldom evaluated their work with clients. The full results of the research are presented in the lead article in this special issue, written by Vivian Lalande and Kris Magnusson. The working group then set out to create a framework for evaluating career development services. That framework is described in the second article in this issue, authored by the initial members' working group that contributed ideas to the development of the model. Members of the CRWG believe that the framework is easy to understand, simple to use, and yet robust enough to adequately embrace the wide variety of career services that exist.

The next two articles provide examples of research that has been conducted in a manner that is congruent with the philosophy underlying the evaluation framework developed by the CRWG. Savard, Michaud, Bilodeau, and Arseneau present a literature review examining the effects of Labour Market Information (LMI) on career decisions. They consider process variables in the use of LMI, such as assisted/unassisted use and quality and quantity of material accessed. They consider input variables such as cognitive complexity and the effect those variables have on outcomes. This review clearly illustrates the importance of considering input and process variables when evaluating the outcomes of an intervention. Michaud, Dionne, and Beaulieu present an evaluation of a competency portfolio used in Québec. Quantitative and qualitative information is used to assess outcome variables such as employment status, return to full-time studies, self-image, self-knowledge, perceived quality of life, and understanding of the transition process. Their study illustrates the importance of combining social-economic outcomes with psychological outcomes when evaluating a program. Finally, a novel approach for demonstrating the economic impact, and return on investment, of career development services is outlined in the article by Stuart Conger and Bryan Hiebert.

Taken together, we think that these articles provide a snapshot of current evaluation practices in Canada and map out a vision for future approaches to demonstrating the value of career development services. We hope that this special issue will help to sustain a continuing dialogue around how we can better demonstrate the value of the services we provide to clients, as well as help counsellors to conceptualize their roles as involving a twofold process of deciding what interventions are appropriate for clients and how they will provide evidence attesting to the outcomes achieved as a result of those interventions.

References

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