
Employment Counsellors' and Youths' Views of the Transition to Work: Preparing to Develop a Work Skills Simulation

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Abstract

The transition to work life is often difficult for adolescents and youth. This paper reviews the transition literature and discusses the results of interviews with youth counsellors and with youth themselves regarding their views of the transition process, barriers or obstacles to successful transitions, characteristics of successful transitions, and the meaning of work. Youth and counsellors consistently identified employment skills, employer characteristics, and social support as important factors in the transition. However, youth counsellors also noted the influence of employment attitudes and expectations while youth stressed the impact of job search experiences and their need for personal fulfillment through work.

Résumé

La transition au monde du travail est souvent difficile pour les adolescents et la jeunesse. Cet article présente une revue de littérature touchant le concept de transition et discute des résultats d'interviews avec des conseillers d'orientation et des adolescents. Ces interviews examinent leur vision du processus de transition, les barrières ou les obstacles qui amènent à une transition réussie, les caractéristiques des transitions réussies, et le sens du travail. Les jeunes et le conseillers ont identifiés de façon constante les habiletés de recherche d'emploi, les caractéristiques de l'employeur et le support social comme des facteurs importants dans la transition. Toutefois, les conseillers ont aussi noté l'influence des attitudes face à l'emploi et les attentes tandis que les adolescents ont stressé l'importance de l'expérience dans la recherche d'emplois et leur besoin de se réaliser à travers leur travail.

This paper is based on the authors' recent work towards the development of a work life simulation for use in a variety of employment preparation contexts. Early in this process, a comprehensive review of the literature on successful transition to work (Cairns, Woodward & Magnusson, 1990) was completed. The results indicated that successful transition is a complex process, made up of an interacting set of task skills, interpersonal skills, and self-management skills, with the latter two sets of skills most likely to be involved in problematic performance. A credible simulation of this complex process would have to teach youth what the required skills were, how to understand these skills in relation to their own present functioning, and how to translate this knowledge into organized and flexible on-the-job performance. It also would need to be sufficiently accurate in its selection of the skills involved and credible in its approach

to simulating the "real world" experience of work that youth and counsellors would perceive it as having personal relevance and utility.

In order to maximize the changes of success in achieving these objectives, a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 youths who were currently involved in making the transition to work and with 5 employment-preparation counsellors, to determine whether the material derived from the literature review accurately reflected their views and experiences. A qualitative research approach to the interview and data-analysis process was selected since the literature review provided sufficient nomothetic data. What was required was an ideographic approach. This article reports the results of the interview process and clarifies differences between the views of counsellors and youth regarding the transition process.

PROCEDURES

Counsellors and youths were contacted through employment-centre advertisements and professional contacts. The youths were offered a small honorarium for participation to ensure their attendance at the interview and to attract as wide a range of participants as possible. Interview guides were developed based on the literature review. Interview length ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours. Counsellors were interviewed in their offices, while the youth interviews were conducted according to the convenience of the particular participant. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis procedure. Categories representing the components of the transition to work which participants believed to be important in describing their experience were identified and further analyzed for themes. The results of the thematic analysis are reported separately for counsellors and for youth in Figure 1. Both counsellors and youths saw the transition from school to full-time employment as a pivotal life event characterized by learning, development and adaptation. However, their perceptions of the central issues involved, while displaying considerable overlap, also showed some important differences.

ANALYSIS OF COUNSELLOR TRANSCRIPTS

Four main categories emerged from the analysis of the counsellor interviews: employment skills; employment attitudes and expectations; social support; and employer characteristics. Each of these categories and its constituent themes is described below. A few representative quotes are provided for each theme to clarify their content and ground the analysis in the data.

FIGURE 1
Counsellor and Youth Categories and Themes of Transition to Work

Categories	Counsellor Themes	Youth Themes
Employment Skills	Self-awareness/self-appraisal Interpersonal and self-management skills Understanding job requirements Taking initiative Coping with work transition stress	Developing necessary work skills Gaining new skills from work Gaining self-knowledge Building self-esteem through work
Employment Attitudes & Expectations	Self-knowledge Expectations of Work Commitment	
Social Support	Stability of personal life Support from friends and family Community involvement	Family, Friends, Co-workers Professionals/ social agencies
Employer Characteristics	Reasonable expectations Job orientation and training Providing constructive feedback Considering employee expectations/ hopes	Dealing with authority Provision of structure and feedback Conflict with employers
Job Search Experiences		Overcoming skill deficits Revising expectations Discouragement
Personal Fulfillment		Looking for meaning in work Looking for personal satisfaction Personal effectiveness: making a contribution Sense of personal specialness

Category 1: Employment Skills

This category corresponded closely to the professional literature and included many statements describing specific skills and personal characteristics which counsellors believed to be central to success in the transition to work. These skills were discussed under five themes:

Theme 1: Self-awareness and self-appraisal. This theme reflected the importance of youth being able to make an accurate assessment of personal skills and abilities and of understanding how these personal qualities fit employer expectations. Sample counsellor statements on this theme included: "it is critical for youth to develop an awareness of what have I got, what haven't I got, and how does it match or fit what people want . . .," "the really successful people have a sense of what counts . . . how they count in that equation. What they can offer and what it is worth and what is crucial. People that aren't successful don't seem to have that sense, that awareness of themselves relative to the employment market," and "The youth who is going to be successful is going to have a more accurate understanding of their strengths, resources, needs, skills, experiences."

Theme 2: Interpersonal and self-management skills. This theme included both general statements about desirable work skills and very specific listings of skills which were essentially identical to those listed in the research literature. Counsellors identified lack of work experience as the main barrier to development of essential interpersonal and decision-making skills. They perceived this lack of experience as responsible for employers' perceptions of youth as lacking interest, competence or initiative. Counsellors also thought that youths have particular difficulties with managing conflict in the workplace. Some sample counsellor statements included: "The more successful people . . . are comfortable and skilled with interpersonal relations. They can deal effectively with people," "Have to be able to get along with others . . . be dependable . . . be on time," ". . . youth seem to have difficulty dealing with conflict or conflict resolution," and "They have difficulty receiving feedback because it is often perceived as criticism . . . they seem to take it more as an attack."

Theme 3: Understanding job requirements. Counsellors often described the goals of transition as successful "role development." They saw successful youths as able to understand the behaviours and attributes demanded by the work role. This understanding was especially necessary when initial work experiences were negative: the youth might not have a personal context for understanding negative work experience, and found it difficult to learn from negative experiences. Counsellors stated that youth needed to ". . . have a really accurate sense of the requirements and personality characteristics that are required," and "be able to identify what is relevant or not relevant for success in that particular position."

Theme 4: Taking initiative. The counsellors agreed that youth had problems with overly dependent behaviour in the workplace. They needed to be more active in seeking out opportunities to demonstrate capabilities. Counsellors agreed that youth should: ". . . also be able to look beyond the task at hand . . . question, inquire, show an interest in what is going on in the organization . . . be inquisitive and don't be afraid to ask questions," and "demonstrate a willingness to learn."

Theme 5: Coping with work transition stress. Methods of dealing with stress were described as distinguishing successful from unsuccessful work transitions. This theme was made up of an amalgam of characteristics described in other categories, but was retained as a separate theme as it provided a useful, integrative overview of successful and unsuccessful transition behaviours from the counsellors' perspective. Counsellors stated that successful transitions were made by individuals who cope with work transition stress by: attempting to under-

stand the basis for their work expectations; developing an awareness of personal work values; resolving interpersonal conflict proactively; developing a personally meaningful definition of success; demonstrating flexibility in accommodating to workplace demands; seeking personal change or influence; taking the initiative to obtain what they need to complete their jobs more successfully; setting their own work standards and organizing their own work experiences; and developing skills in self-appraisal and self-management.

In contrast, the counsellors believed that unsuccessful transitions were common among those who coped with work stress by: waiting for difficult or unsatisfying situations to change; leaving jobs without addressing the difficulties; hoping that others will take responsibility for them; avoiding dealing with interpersonal conflict; responding negatively, failing to respond, or failing to respond appropriately, to constructive criticism; being influenced strongly by friend's and family's work values; showing little resiliency; being easily distracted from or careless about tasks; and showing little initiative.

Category 2: Employment Attitudes and Expectations

This category described developmentally related characteristics of youth that were problematic in their successful work performance. In part, this category corresponded to the "discouragement" and "changing expectations" themes in the adolescent "Job search experiences" category (Table 1). However, it also overlapped with the youth category "personal fulfillment." The themes in this category include:

Theme 1: Self-knowledge. Many respondents discussed the notion of "personally defined success" which suggested the need for the youth to define success in personally relevant terms. Overall, counsellors saw their youth clients as lacking a coherent knowledge of their own work preferences. Some sample counsellor statements include: "they're not quite sure what they do want and you can't even start with what they don't want, because they don't know that either," and "they don't know that what they are going through is pretty normal."

Theme 2: Expectations of work. Specific requirements in this theme were defined as "balance" and "flexibility," or a need for youth to maintain a sense of proportion and perspective. Successful youth were seen as demonstrating flexibility in work-role demands, opportunities and difficulties, and ability to adapt quickly and effectively to co-workers and job tasks by altering work behaviours and expectations. The theme was very frequently mentioned as a lack of youth "realism." Counsellors believed that successful transitions require the abandonment of set dysfunctional expectations or beliefs and the acceptance of new ones. Counsellors said that: "A lot of them [youth]

have . . . unrealistic expectations," "They sure don't understand that every job has an apprenticeship period . . .," "They want sort of, almost like a quick fix," and "Kids unfortunately internalize . . . instead of recognizing that as long as they have that kind of education and fewer skills, those are the kinds of jobs they are only going to be able to apply for."

Theme 3: Commitment. This theme reflected the counsellors' views that it was difficult for many young people to show a commitment to their work—to take it seriously and focus on performance in spite of possible negative job characteristics. They stated that: "The key factor . . . is the commitment, the willingness to make a commitment and to take responsibility for that commitment," "You are not here because someone else wants you to be here. You want to be here," "A positive attitude towards the menial tasks [must be there] in any job," and "[She is] not willing to commit to anything because [she doesn't] understand that this is not a life-time commitment."

Category 3: Social Support

This category was clearly most relevant for marginal youth, and was seen as distinguishing higher-risk youth from mainstream individuals. The greater the integration of individuals into a family, social group and community, the less likely it was that they would have work transition problems.

Theme 1: Stability of personal life. This theme included examples of youth who had no permanent address, were neglected or abused by parents, and who had deficits in basic need fulfillment that prevented them from focusing on work agendas. Counsellors said: "No stability in their personal life . . . no support . . .," and "A lot of them don't have support groups period . . . they have nothing."

Theme 2: Support from friends and family. While counsellors believed that most youth receive positive support from family and friends, in some cases this support was seen as taking non-constructive forms which were contradictory to positive work values. In such cases, the effects of family life, negative parental work history, and personal development experiences with friends were cited as having the potential to discourage successful work transition. Sample counsellor statements on this theme included: "No role models," and "The thing is for many of our students . . . getting the support at home."

Theme 3: Community involvement. The more embedded youth were in community networks, the more likely they were thought to be able to make successful transitions to work. The source of the effect was usually thought to be greater opportunities for learning basic inter-

personal skills. Sample counsellor statements on this theme included: "I think the kids that are successful are the ones that have support . . . they've had a lot of extracurricular stuff as opposed to other kids," and ". . . involved in the community . . . they do volunteer work . . . their social skills are also a lot higher."

Category 4: Employer Characteristics

Counsellors also saw employer characteristics as being critical to youths' success in making the transition to work. A number of themes were isolated from their comments, describing elements of the employer's contribution to youth success. Unfortunately, counsellors believed that these facilitative employer behaviours were rare. Nevertheless, the list of positive employer characteristics may be a helpful checklist for potential employers of youth to use in establishing working conditions which are likely to promote stability in their workforce.

Theme 1: Reasonable expectations. Successful employers were characterized as being aware of the special needs of youth in transition, and responding to these needs by: providing the proper tools and materials to accomplish the job; providing an atmosphere and opportunities for mentoring on inter-personal issues and appropriate problem-solving; and gradually increasing employees' responsibility and reducing direct supervision. Counsellors stated that: "A lot of employers . . . are willing to give them the break . . . they sort of tell them . . . if you can sort of come to terms with yourself and do a good job, I'll give you a chance," "A lot of employers have sort of a low tolerance point as well as some of those kids, whereas others are good," and ". . . realistic expectations . . . patience. . . ."

Theme 2: Job training and orientation. Helpful employers were seen as providing adequate role orientation, training and support, and as clearly defining the work role for employees. Counsellors stated that: "To be an effective team member is really critical and employers can help youth or any employee to become integrated into a team by adequate orientation, by showing him a list of qualities," and "Willingness to invest your time for the training of them and supervision of their work [is essential]."

Theme 3: Providing constructive feedback. Youth employees were seen as benefiting from clear and constructive performance-related feedback, especially when that feedback was based on specific information from the job orientation. Sample counsellor statements on this theme included: "The expectations or the objectives are clearly laid, so that you know what the standards are and the expectations from the employer, and the feedback should be based on that," "Feedback

has to be immediate, it has to be direct . . . feedback has to be based on . . . a very good orientation at the beginning," "It should be immediate . . . it should be direct . . . it should be given in a way that builds the self-esteem," and "Disagreements . . . have to be aired openly and frankly."

Theme 4: Considering employee expectations and hopes. This theme is seen by counsellors as being of particular importance. It involves the ability and willingness of the employer to empathize with and support the youth employee's personal goals and aspirations. It may reflect the counsellor's awareness of youth's need for meaning and satisfaction in their work. Some comments included: "You've got to . . . encourage development, to encourage growth, to encourage mobility and diversity, if that is expected by an employee," "You have to build an incentive for continued satisfaction," and "Good skills at assessing whether expectations are being met or not."

ANALYSIS OF THE YOUTH TRANSCRIPTS

The interview transcripts were analyzed to determine major categories of content in youth responses to the interview questions. The emergent categories included employment skills, employer characteristics, social support, job search experiences, and personal fulfillment. These categories were further analyzed to determine important themes within each. The major categories and themes are shown in Table 1.

Three youth categories (1-3) correspond to counsellor categories, while two (4 and 5) were substantially different. Even with the common categories, however, there were often differences between youths and counsellors in emphasis or point of view. The youth categories which are similar to counsellor categories are briefly discussed here to highlight differences, while more detail is provided for categories 4 and 5.

Category 1: Employment Skills

Theme 1: Necessary work skills. Unlike the counsellors, the youth participants in the study did not readily provide listings of desirable characteristics in employees. When pressed to do so, they came up with a limited range of possibilities (interpersonal skills, coping with stress, working effectively with others, willingness, initiative, perseverance, having goals, and wanting to be there), with the currently employed youth naming more skills than those currently unemployed or participating in work preparation programs. Youths focused more than counsellors did on the work experience itself as producing an awareness of what skills were important to job maintenance. Technical skills or knowledge were rarely mentioned as necessary attributes for suc-

cess; rather, the youths focused on interpersonal skills and attitudinal issues. Some illustrative comments included: "One anti-social person in a well-adjusted environment will . . . tend to bring morale down an awful lot. So a complete lack of social skills, or flawed social skills . . . is a big handicap," "Be willing to deal with your failures and your setbacks as well because there are going to be failures . . . you learn from them," "The two main things are basically, knowing what you want to do and doing it and having a good attitude about it," and "Knowing what you are doing, your objectives on the job. And trying to fill these conditions. Do it to the best of your ability."

Theme 2: Gaining new skills from work. Youth emphasized using employment to learn the necessary skills, rather than learning them prior to employment. They commented particularly on developing self-confidence, persisting in spite of failures, and overcoming personal limitations. Sample youth statements on this theme included: "I think I can take responsibility now. . . . I know that I can do what they tell me so I guess I have a higher self-esteem now," ". . . my openness to people. I've learned to interact with people so much more and . . .," "I was extremely shy and I had to overcome that because I was in positions where I would be dealing with the public, and sales positions as well. . . . And I guess that gave me self-confidence," and "And I've pretty much modelled myself into who I want to be. I've done it myself. . . . I've worked hard and I've changed a lot of the things I do."

Theme 3: Gaining self-knowledge. This theme included comments on work as a way of learning about personal characteristics that might clarify future job choice. They thought it was desirable to "try different things" in order to develop a broader base of skills and to determine what the "right kind of work for you" might be. Many of them, for these reasons, did not particularly value or expect job stability or commitment. Sample youth statements on this theme included: "I've done jobs knowing that for a temporary period of time it would be OK and that's the way I enter most jobs—if I don't like it I know I can back out, and look for something else. It's not like I'm making a major commitment," "And I found it hard to take the sort of office structure, the office environment seriously—the dress codes, the arriving promptly on time. As long as the work gets done, who cares what time I do it or who cares what I look like when I'm doing it as long as I'm not a PR person?," and "Some of the people . . . didn't appreciate this sort of Bart Simpson attitude of complete irreverence to their authority figures. They didn't like my personality but I was able to sort of mitigate somewhat."

Theme 4: Building self-esteem through work. Some respondents reported that the end result of the processes described in this category

was an improvement in self-esteem. There was a tone of being surprised and pleased about being taken seriously by employers. Youth said that: "It's really changed because I tend to be a lot more friendly wherever I go . . . I tend to say 'hi' to people I don't know more often, things like that," "I guess I have a higher self-esteem now," and "I didn't expect them to really trust me or have confidence in my ability to do things."

Category 2: Employer Characteristics

This category described employer behaviours which youth saw as particularly important to their success at work and validated the counsellor comments. For example, the provision of training and feedback were both frequently mentioned. The employer, as opposed to fellow employees, seemed particularly salient to these young people. The youths' perceptions of an employer's use of authority, were particularly important, with common comments about being "respected by" and "equal to" the employer. Some issues were raised here that were not mentioned by the counsellors—particularly youth experiences with harassment and what they perceived as adult prejudice against youth.

Theme 1: Dealing with authority. The personal characteristics and interpersonal style of the employer, and particularly how the employer managed to convey requirements while still demonstrating respect for the employee, were important to the respondents. Some also reported their own destructive response to authority or disillusionment with some employers: "One of the first ones that I've come to realize is the employee-employer relationship . . . if I like my employer, I'll bend over backwards to satisfy him in the performance I do. And if I don't . . . there isn't that extra that I'll give," "I'd go in there, I'd be lazy, if . . . said well you do this, I'd say well f-you, you do it yourself," "One job I had while I was in school . . . was my first job basically. But the people I worked with were not very intelligent people, my boss was not very intelligent at all," and "When I was sixteen and I hadn't had a job, . . . he just put me out there. . . . I got treated as everyone else was. . . . I could think of myself as more responsible."

Theme 2: Provision of structure and feedback. In common with the counsellors, youths described the positive employer relationship as providing sufficient structure and performance-related feedback to make successful performance possible, but doing so in a manner that demonstrated respect. The absence of feedback promoted discouragement and uncertainty, while poor interpersonal skills in the employer aroused resentment. Sample youth statements on this theme

included: "The manager was very thorough in explaining what the duties were . . . what the wage was, . . . and exactly how the place was run. And they said this is how we want you to dress, this is how we want our customers treated . . .," "The way I felt . . . going into that job . . . I think that I will probably know what is going on at all times. . . . And if I know the employer is someone I can communicate with, then. . . . If I have a problem or they have a problem, they're going to tell me about it right away too," ". . . here's your paycheck, you deserve every penny of it, it just, wow, right on, great, makes you feel good inside. Makes your job worth doing," and "They kept on ignoring me which they were kind of busy and they never had time to talk to me and so I decided not to work there."

Theme 3: Conflict with employers. Conflicts seemed to be particularly difficult for youth to handle, often leaving them feeling hurt, confused and self-critical. They often left jobs because of a dislike of further confrontations and a sense of hopelessness about attempts to meet employer expectations. Problems with prejudice and sexual harassment were also reported. Sample youth statements on this theme included: "My boss, or whoever is telling you what to do, if they're looking down at you and if they are yelling at you or just if they've got a bad attitude basically, you just get turned off by it," "Because if you are giving 100% and the person you are working for is maybe not giving 100%, you know, hypocrisy," "I've been turned down from jobs because of my age. They didn't feel that I was old enough . . . if I prove myself to be responsible, what's the problem?," and "It is very difficult to go into another company when they ask you why you've left and you say, my boss made a pass at me . . . that is probably what makes me feel the most like a failure. . . . The fact that I didn't do something about it. Is that I let it affect me personally to not go on."

Category 3: Social Support

This category, as with the employer characteristics category, showed extensive overlap between youth and counsellors. Respondents spoke principally of support, or absence of support, from four sources: family, friends, co-workers and professionals or social agencies.

Theme 1: Family. Most comments here were about the importance of positive support from family members and were often descriptive of such support. Comments often referred specifically to the mother's role in providing this support, or sometimes describing her long-term support, or sometimes expressing the feeling that the mother might be ambivalent about the youth getting a job. Youth said that: "My family has always been supportive of me. . . . I've gotten positive advice from my parents. . . . And I think that has helped a lot," "Well my mom

was the one who suggested me going down there and I think she is more or less gearing me towards where I should be. . . . So I think my mom has a good influence on me," "She was concerned about where I'd be working, about the working conditions, how much I'm getting paid . . . and where I'm working," "And I don't find anything helping me other than my mom," and "I'd like to get a job and she seemed for me to want to get a job. But every time I'd go to . . . do something about it she's kind of pulling me back . . . whether she just doesn't want to see me work or, I don't know."

Theme 2: Friends. Support from friends was seen as primarily helpful during the job-search process. Once a job was obtained, however, friends were more often seen as disruptive of work commitments. Sample youth statements on this theme included: "Friends keep asking me if I've got a job yet. . . . They keep me going," "If anything they . . . take me away . . . spending more time with them," and "Whatever is going on in your life outside the job can affect your job. . . . Some people I know . . . have jobs and their social life interferes with that."

Theme 3: Co-workers. Supportive co-workers were a very positive incentive to some respondents, while conflict with co-workers was sometimes a problem: "And often times I would go into work knowing who I would be working with that night or that day. And say, oh good, I get to see this person," "The people they are very nice, very supportive. They overlooked what I've done in the past and it didn't bother them at all . . . they worked with me, they showed me exactly what needed to be done and how it needed to be done," "Your co-workers can put up barriers because they may take a dislike to you immediately," "I worked at that for about 3 weeks and that didn't work out with the people I was working with . . . there was a misunderstanding which I didn't ever find out what happened with that so."

Theme 4: Professionals/social agencies. Neither counsellors nor social agencies were frequently mentioned as sources of information or support. Occasional references were made to personal "discovery" of resources in the community of which the youth had not previously been aware. One youth stated that: ". . . I came across the career centre and the whole bit. I'd never heard of it. Nothing. And I think in a way it would help because they have a career program in so far as, you know, a counsellor would work with you. . . . I never had that."

References to school programs for job preparation and to counsellors were seldom made. When these resources were mentioned, they were often described as ineffective or insufficient. Sample youth statements on this theme included: "No, not even the counsellors. They haven't helped one bit," "High school hasn't been a help. And

then when I went down to the unemployment centre, they've got the books down there which are really informative," and "I had no idea what it would be like exactly. They tried to tell us at school . . . they attempt . . . to prepare you for this. I was . . . not as well prepared as I would have liked to have been."

Still, a few respondents reported positive reactions to employment preparation programs for marginal youth and others believed that help was available but might just be hard to find. These youth stated that ". . . if you can't get out of what you're in, get help, find some help. Because it is out there. There is a lot of people willing, able and caring enough to help you get out of the ruts you're in. Just find the help. Look for it," and ". . . since I got involved in the program, I've learned all that stuff, that sort of puts you in a wholly different position in terms of getting work, being successful out there in the work world."

Category 4: Job Search Experiences

Many participants noted that they had been unprepared for the experience of looking for work. They reported having had mistaken expectations as to what these experiences might be or as to how interviews would be conducted. Some were surprised to find work so available, while others complained that no work was available. There was a common perception that lack of preparation for the application and selection process posed a barrier to obtaining employment.

Theme 1: Overcoming skill deficits. This theme included descriptions of problems related to a lack of knowledge about the job search process. While a few respondents had no problem in locating jobs, this was usually felt to be due to the fact that all of their work experience had been gained via informal contact through family and friends. Others found that they had to search out sources of information that were new to them. They stated that: "Most good jobs are not advertised in the pages of the newspapers. Most of my good jobs that I found were through leads, somebody else, or going through the phone book," "It took a long time to develop the knowledge of where to look for jobs. I'm from a smaller place and it's always basically been like that. I've just known somebody and got the job," and "As I said I've done a lot of interviews. . . . I do gain from it, I learn a lot more about myself. All the time, every time I do one of these interviews."

Theme 2: Revising expectations. The unrealistic expectations identified by counsellors were also described by youth. They accepted the need to understand that the work that was currently available to them was not often attractive, and talked often about having to make the best of it. Their statements reflected some ambivalence and the need for continuing efforts to accept the necessity of unattractive work:

“And just to realize that I can’t expect to have the greatest thing right now, that I have to, there are more things that I have to do and I have to expect that is going to come later on,” “I have to keep in mind that I can’t, I don’t expect to get a perfect job,” and “One day I know that I am going to be very well off and I’m going to be in the perfect job. And for right now, this is what I have to do to get, in order to get there. . . . I know that eventually it will happen. So this is just the way it has to be right now. And it’s not awful, it’s not horrible. I have other things in my life to make me happy too.”

Theme 3: Discouragement. Aside from the necessity to accept poorly paid or unattractive work, the youth respondents also reported considerable discouragement as a result of their experiences in looking for work. They spoke of financial problems, of homelessness, of not knowing how to explain their lack of success in obtaining work and of increasing feelings of hopelessness. They did not feel prepared to cope with these feelings and gave predominantly self-critical explanations for their problems. If they were not interviewed, or were interviewed but not hired, they assumed that the fault was their own. Their subsequent successes were then explained in terms of luck rather than personal characteristics. Sample youth statements on this theme included: “I think it was just luck because they needed to hire people,” “I’ve sort of accepted the fact that they hired me because they needed somebody and it wasn’t because I walked in there and they said, oh, she is a perfect person, sort of thing,” “Job searches, eventually you come to the end of the rope, where you are financially exhausted. . . . I’ve lived in my car before,” “. . . I have an interview and if I don’t get the job, it just sort of puts me in a rut, saying well I’m not going to get a job anyways,” and “It turned out to be a lot more depressing than I thought it was going to be.”

Category 5: Personal Fulfillment

This category contained comments which were similar to the counselors’ concerns about “realistic expectations.” However, while many of the participants recognized the need to lower their expectations of work (see Category 4, Theme 2), they nevertheless continued to express an intense desire for work that contributed to the realization of more existential goals. They seemed to be seeking something similar to Baum and Stewart’s (1990) “meaningful feelings,” implying that their search for meaning in work may reflect a need for affective intensity. The themes here were concerned with issues related to meaning, personal satisfaction, making a contribution, and feeling special or unique.

Theme 1: Looking for meaning in work. Unless work contained some sense of purpose or meaning, most of these adolescents could see no point in doing it. If the work offended a personal value, such as concern for the environment, it was also likely to be rejected. Some youths were able to make the work more meaningful by focusing on "doing it right," but this strategy only seemed to work where the job was already within reasonable limits of meaning or purpose. For example, they said: "I could attribute it [unsuccessful work experience] to one thing. My lack of interest in keeping a job. If I don't like a job, I'll leave. I know some people who take a job that is . . . really insignificant and boring, monotonous. They stay there. I will not stay in that type of a job," "There was . . . this sense of the work that we were doing, that they didn't really have anything useful for us to do, so they just found the stuff that they couldn't be bothered to do. It was simple enough, it was a make-work project," and "I wasn't satisfied with what was going on environmentally . . . and I'm interested in the environment, as well as my own personal health."

Theme 2: Looking for personal satisfaction. These adolescents repeatedly described the work available to them as boring, meaningless and repetitious. Entry-level jobs for youth have been described as lacking challenge (Gottlieb, 1986), and it is apparent that youths interviewed for this study found little at work that offered stimulation or incentive. Their views included: "why should you stick with something where you don't feel you want to be there?", "It's no use doing the job if you don't want to be there. And if you're not going to be satisfied or proud of the result," and "Self-satisfaction. It give you fulfillment . . . when I was doing crime, I was certainly getting a high off it. . . . If your work habits change . . . you get a whole different outlook on life. You get that same type of high without doing the same type of things."

Theme 3: Personal effectiveness: making a contribution. "Restrictions on feeling useful" are particularly common in young men aged 17-25, a group which is also characterized by high levels of risk-taking and of suicide. The absence of meaningful work may be particularly problematic for this group since ". . . sources of meaning act to embed and solidify our commitments and permit us to grow, develop and branch out into more meaningful lives." (Baum & Stewart, 1990, p. 12). Some were able to find work that they felt made a contribution. When they did not, they felt isolated and impotent. Some illustrative comments included: "I would rather work on a construction site . . . than have an office job. . . . Because on the site I can see what I am doing. In an office job I'd be pushing papers and I can't see how that is affecting things, I'm just a number," ". . . the longer you are out of work, the more you feel like you are just sort of a leech, you are not really

contributing, you are not living up to your potential,” and “I could see what I’d been doing. . . . I can go out to the bush now and . . . just say that I did all of this by myself. And there is no one to blame but me if it is screwed up.”

Theme 4: Sense of personal specialness. The most interesting aspects of this category were the possible connections between the “myth of personal specialness,” which is thought by health educators to explain high levels of risk-taking in adolescence, and the adolescent’s need to avoid “meaningless work” revealed in their statements. They expressed a sense of determination not to give up the image of themselves as different or as having something unique to offer. This sense of personal uniqueness and difference was offended by the meaningless or routine work they were obliged to accept.

What employment counsellors spoke of as “unrealistic attitudes and expectations,” then, seen from a youth perspective, take on the characteristics of a search for personal meaning and refusal to accept a humdrum life. For example, youth said that: “I rather prefer the person that . . . can accept me for what I am, not for what they want me to be. It is really important to me . . . ,” “If I go to a regular job for too long, I become a machine. . . . I couldn’t handle getting up five days a week for 365 days and going and doing the same job,” “And I feel I have something to contribute . . . maybe in a couple of years I can make something a little better than it was,” “I know I can put my all into it, I can generate a level of innovation,” and “Like, when I am working behind an office, that is fine and it is respectable. But I could be so much more, I could be so much more creative.”

CONCLUSION

The similarities and differences between counsellor and youth views of the transition to work suggest a number of interesting implications both for counselling practice and for research. The comments of both youth and counsellors provide helpful listings of essential employee and employer skills, and counsellors were particularly specific in their comparisons between youth who make successful and unsuccessful transitions. Taken together, the comments suggest useful revisions or changes in emphasis in existing work skills development programs and curricula. These changes may be needed in both content and process aspects of programs. Content changes might include, for example, a stronger focus on specific conflict-management skill training, and on community resource identification, while process changes centre on the need to use more experiential activity components.

Few of the youth interviewed for the study believed that the high school programs intended to prepare them for finding and maintain-

ing employment had been effective. Their dissatisfaction derived from concerns about not being well prepared for the application and interview process, and about having limited or no knowledge of community resources available to assist in finding employment. They repeatedly expressed the view that they needed to learn by doing, not by being told what to do—a common principle in adult education which seems to have been overlooked in many classrooms. Career education, like health education, may need to be taught from a much more “process” than “content” perspective; with “on-the-job” training opportunities greatly expanded either through experiential classroom activities or through expanded co-operative education programs.

This study also has important implications for our understanding of youths’ perceptions of the meaning of work and its possible connections to the developmental processes related to specialness and risk-taking. Current counselling literature refers to the importance of assessing the salience of the work role in relation to other life roles (Super, 1990), and to the significance of understanding the impact of work values on career development (Herr & Cramer, 1988). However, there are apparently a number of other connections which can be made among counselling theory, research literature and youth’s search for meaning at work. Further qualitative investigation of these issues is needed. The counsellors in our study, and much of the counselling literature, seems to us to underestimate youths’ need for fulfillment from work. This position may be insufficiently respectful of what appears in this study to be an important developmental concern. Currently, Redekopp & Day (1991) perhaps come closest to capturing the intensity of our subjects’ search for personally meaningful work.

As a further result of these interviews, five skills described by the research literature, by counsellors, and by youth as being important to successful transition to work were identified and used to structure the development of a work skills simulation. These skills include basic literacy and numeracy, self-management skills, co-operative action skills, problem-solving skills, and leadership skills. Process characteristics required in the simulation to maintain its personal relevance for participants were also identified. These process characteristics include, for example, ensuring opportunities for youth to feel that a contribution is being made, maintaining appropriately high-affective intensity in the activities, and providing opportunities for skilled work.

Based on these observations, a work skills simulation (Wonder-Tech, Inc.) has subsequently been developed and tested through five field-test iterations, each one providing formative feedback on how

the incorporation of the essential skills and processes might be more effectively achieved. Further articles describing the field-test process are in press, and the simulation is expected to be available for use in school- and agency-based work skills programs in 1993.

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