

NEW APPROACHES TO OCCUPATIONAL EXPLORATION IN
THE MIDDLE SCHOOL*

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A new interest in occupational exploration for students in the middle school has been sparked by the 1968 Vocational Education Amendments. The Exemplary Programs and Projects section of the amendments has been designed explicitly to demonstrate the worth of ongoing programs which could serve as models for improving vocational education at all levels and provide the means for creating new and more efficient methods of job preparation. More specifically the exemplary section applies to programs designed to acquaint elementary and secondary school students with the broad range of occupations for which special skills are required.¹

Many State Departments of Education have taken advantage of this opportunity to develop and implement occupational exploration programs designed for the elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, or comprehensive school (K-12). The success of most of these new programs of occupational exploration seems to depend upon developing congenial working relationships between general educators, vocational educators, and guidance personnel. Many more schools in the future will probably have opportunities to take advantage of funds for instituting these programs. At least one state has mandated that world of work instruction take place in all elementary grades in all schools. Occupational orientation and exploration has also been included in the state's definition of voca-

*A research study which identifies features of current occupational exploration programs in the middle school; offers guidelines for initiating and implementing these programs; and suggests implications which these programs may have for future school operation.

tional education, making these programs eligible for state vocational education funding. The question might well be raised as to how soon other states will follow suit and require occupational exploration at all educational levels?

² A dissertation study recently completed by one of the writers provides some guidelines for those who are interested in instituting and implementing programs of occupational exploration. These guidelines were developed as a result of a survey of current programs and with the advice of a national jury of persons conversant with occupational exploration programs in the middle school.

Importance of Occupational Exploration in the Middle School

Recent social economic, political, and technological trends have progressively removed youngsters from contact with the world of work. Many students are unfamiliar with their parent's occupations. Most are unaware of the characteristics and requirements of various jobs and many have developed a negative attitude toward work. The disadvantaged student has still a different problem since he has no work model with which to relate.

In the ninth grade many students are required to make vocational decisions as they choose the course, or curriculum track, they will follow. To make these decisions students need a background of occupational information as well as the self-understanding necessary to make intelligent choices. Systematic programs must be developed and implemented to assist students in forming desirable work attitudes and habits to help them become familiar with their interests and abilities and to relate these characteristics to job opportunities.

During the past ten years comprehensive occupational experience programs (K-12) have been stressed by vocational educators and guidance personnel alike. Programs of this nature are probably more valuable as a framework for assisting students in making classroom experiences meaningful than merely amassing knowledge about career clusters.

To enable an educational program to be developmental, integrative, and relevant it is important that association with the world of work begin early, preferably in the elementary school. However, because a comprehensive career exploration program cannot be established overnight, it has been neces-

sary to select a portion of the educational continuum which might provide the greatest impact for the resources expended. This educational strata has been identified by many as the middle or junior high school. There are several reasons for this choice. At this developmental stage students are curious, eager to learn, and are becoming aware of the necessity of making a tentative career choice. For many, a decision concerning a vocational speciality will have to be made in the ensuing two to four years. In addition, at this level the school dropout rate begins to increase; therefore, any occupational information which can be provided these youngsters, before leaving school, will increase their chances for success in the world of work.

Today's programs of career exploration are not to be confused with the "Vocational Courses" of the thirties and forties, which in many cases were textbook oriented and quite irrelevant to student concerns. Dr. Charles Weaver, State Supervisor of Ohio Guidance Services, describes today's programs as follows:

"Through career exploration programs at grades nine and ten students are assisted toward the development and crystalization of their vocational self-concepts. Firsthand observations and in-depth work experiences in a variety of jobs help students in reaching conclusions concerning the fields and levels of work which are most appropriate for them. As a result, these students will be in a much better position to make tentative choices and commitments to a type of education which will lead them toward appropriate occupational fields. Although consistency of choice at the age of fourteen varies greatly among youths, yet, at this age, progress can be expected toward a conscious awareness that as they grow older they will eventually have to make an occupational choice."

Features of Current Programs of Occupational Exploration

Important characteristics of existing junior high school prevocational education programs were identified in the writer's doctoral study.³

Twenty operational junior high school prevocational education programs were identified with the help of the various State Departments of Education. A survey of these programs found that the average prevocational education program was less than three years old, was experimental in nature, and had a primary program objective of acquainting the students with the largest possible number of job opportunity areas which may be available to them upon completion of their schooling. The programs were most often found in the eighth grade, were commonly required of all students in the grade, and enrolled approximately twenty-five students per class. Career orientation or exploration required about one-sixth of the student's class time; and orientation to all areas and levels of vocations was provided through the use of films, filmstrips, resource persons and field trips. The curriculum emphasized both career orientation and career exploration, utilizing about one-fourth of its allotted time for films and resource people at work in their occupations. Guidance personnel in the school were responsible for assisting teachers in helping students determine their interests and abilities.

Junior high school prevocational education was provided through separate courses in the curriculum as well as by interdisciplinary means. The trend seemed to be toward adopting the interdisciplinary approach where occupational exploration is woven into all courses in the curriculum. Most of the programs studied were organized around the developmental theory of vocational development similar to that advocated by Super, and Ginzberg and his associates. Basically, these programs provided the student with an opportunity to explore a wide range of occupational opportunities and to compare the job requirements with his interests, abilities, and limitations without making any definite vocational commitment.

Guidelines for Initiating and Implementing Programs of Occupational Exploration

After identifying unique characteristics of existing programs of occupational exploration, it was believed desirable to arrive at some guidelines for instituting and implementing new programs in the junior high school. A jury was selected which consisted of seventeen prominent educators occupying such positions as State Director of Vocational Education, Local Director of Vocational Education, Professor of Educational Administration, State Guidance Director, Local Counselor, and Teacher.

Tentative guidelines were submitted to this group for rating and revision and a final list of the thirteen guidelines which follow were formulated. It is believed that these guidelines will serve as a framework in organizing and implementing junior high school prevocational education programs.

1. Junior high school prevocational education program objectives should be directed toward student understanding of career opportunities and assessment of personal interests, abilities, and limitations.
2. The design of prevocational education programs should be such that the most effective orientation to the world of work may be provided.
3. The instructional staff in prevocational education should be familiar with the program goals and objectives, well versed in the occupations relating to their instructional area, and proficient in the skills of teaching and incorporating occupational information into the subject material.
4. Effective occupational education can best be accomplished by providing some form of occupational acquaintance, orientation, exploration, and preparation in grades K through twelve.
5. Prevocational education staff members should be provided with in-service education and class preparation time commensurate with the objectives of the program.
6. Prevocational education should be recognized as an important part of the educational program, justifying adequate funds to effectively operate the program.
7. Curriculum and activities for prevocational education programs should be carefully structured to provide an exploratory view of career opportunities and assessment of personal interest and abilities.
8. Community involvement in prevocational education is essential in maintaining parental and public interest in the program, as well as providing students with an opportunity for a realistic view of the world of work.

9. Public schools should provide prevocational education essential in maintaining parental and public interest in the program, as well as providing students with an opportunity for a realistic view of the world of work.
10. Appropriate and adequate facilities and equipment should be made available for programs of prevocational education to provide students with the opportunity to participate in relevant and realistic experiences.
11. Occupational counselors should be available to help students assess their interests, abilities, needs, and desires as they plan for the future through the prevocational education program.
12. The administration and supervision of prevocational education programs should have as their goal the most efficient and meaningful educational experience possible for the student.
13. Continuous and planned programs of evaluation should be an integral part of all prevocational education programs.

Some explanation of these guidelines, and their implications for the middle school program, seem desirable at this point.

These guidelines suggest that an interdisciplinary approach to providing prevocational education will be desirable and that this approach will provide a close working relationship between all disciplines, at all grade levels. The guidelines suggest that it will not be possible to assign a person to teach a course and meet the needs of junior high school students in getting acquainted with career possibilities. There are clear indications that guidance personnel must be closely involved in the occupational exploration program. The guidelines suggest that more effective pupil-teacher-counselor relationships can result from a well organized program of occupational exploration. This will require closer coordination of the efforts of elementary, middle school, and senior high school teachers with guidance personnel.

Occupationally oriented teachers may make special contributions to the occupational experience program, but should not

assume the total responsibility. Teachers of industrial arts, and such vocations as agri-business, distributive education, and home economics should be encouraged to provide or cooperate in orientation and exploratory experiences in their laboratories and shops.

The guidelines suggest that a new curriculum, and new curriculum materials must be developed to provide meaningful learning through interdisciplinary approaches.

A program as comprehensive as that suggested by the guidelines will generally require additional staff. Teachers and coordinators of an occupational experience program must be broadly educated individuals who can present a broad spectrum of the world of work to junior high school students and will have a good understanding of the interests and needs of students of this age group. Another important staff function will be that of in-service education of all teachers who will be involved in any part of the program.

Finally, community understanding, support, and involvement must be cultivated concerning the occupational exploration program. Like any new program in the community, public understanding will be most important.

Summary

Occupational experience programs offer a means of meeting important needs of students enrolled in the middle school. Such programs as outlined in this article are much broader than mere "courses" in occupations. They must involve the learner in realistic experiences which acquaint him with his own potential in an increasingly complex occupational milieu. Such programs, while they will require much thought, imagination, and initiative offer an opportunity of enriching the lives of many students now enrolled in the junior high school.

References

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²Budke, Wesley E. 'Guidelines for the Development of Pre-vocational Programs at the Junior High School Level.' Unpublished P h. D. Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1970.

³Ibid.

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