The Case for Career-Related Learning in Primary Schools

An invitation to primary school principals

Primary school principals who implement career-related learning note its impact on student aspiration, engagement and achievement.

Introduction

The NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) has demonstrated its commitment to ensuring that all students are equipped and prepared to face the challenges and opportunities of the emerging world of work.

In 2013 the Department hosted a Primary Schools Symposium: ‘Integrating career skilling through the curriculum... what has been learnt?’ which heralded the emergence of career-related learning (CRL) in NSW primary schools. Primary educators who were explicitly implementing career-related learning programs were joined by representatives from DEC, and research personnel from the University of Newcastle and Education Services Australia to explore the achievements, benefits and future directions of career-related learning in NSW primary schools. Participants clearly articulated the drivers behind their decision to incorporate career-related learning into the curriculum; their learning journeys; and the anecdotal and observable benefits of each initiative.

The symposium confirmed strong parallels between the practice in these lighthouse schools, contemporary research findings, and national education and social policy. Discussion was underpinned by the shared belief that learning ensures the future wellbeing of students by providing a foundation for successful participation in the community, and that career related learning generates engagement and relevance for students, essential ingredients for effective learning.

This paper invites principals of primary schools to examine the case for implementing career-related learning within their school context. It will draw on presentations that illustrate the work of schools and the real opportunities to improve student aspiration, engagement, achievement and future wellbeing that accrue through a planned, integrated commitment to career related learning.

Sharing the experiences and learning revealed during the Symposium will showcase the achievement of each school, encourage others to follow suit and support those interested from ‘re-inventing the wheel’.

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Rationale for career-related learning in primary schools

Career development is a maturation process that begins very early in life. It refers to the ongoing process of a person managing their life, learning and work over their lifespan. It involves developing the skills and knowledge that enable individuals to plan and make informed decisions about education, training and career choices. (McMahon, Patton, Tatham, 2002 and referenced in the National Career Development Strategy p4.)

The National Career Development Strategy, released in May 2013, stated that the schooling sector has a key role in supporting the development of effective career development skills in young people including fostering the development of career skills through the school curriculum, from the early years through to post compulsory years.

Children growing up in the 21st century will be seeking careers in an environment characterised by change, chance and uncertainty. As Peter Garrett commented in the Minister’s foreword to the National Career Development Strategy (2013):

“We are not single-mindedly pursuing one ‘career goal’ which will deliver ultimate happiness, but navigating a ‘career journey’ and trying to ensure that our needs for income, skills development, work/life balance and personal fulfilment are met throughout.”

Many teachers in primary schools, although they may not be familiar with career development frameworks, are aware of the importance of expanding each child’s awareness of the work that adults do and of challenging their attitudes about gendered work roles. As a consequence, many primary teachers engage their students in learning that could be described as career-related learning.

“Career-related learning is not about asking eight-year olds what they want to do in the future! (Children must be allowed their childhood.) It is work that builds on children’s growing awareness of themselves and the world of work, and weaves what they know into useful learning for now and later.” (Watts, 2002)

School communities are moving from the practice of providing a “just-in-time” careers service to delivering career education that supports young people’s career development as a maturation process that starts in the early years.

Toukley teacher Wendy Wilson noted that, “It’s no longer acceptable to dress up in career roles in primary school, do work experience in Year 10 and that’s career education.”

At the local level the most significant drivers of career-related learning in primary schools have been school executive and teachers who have responded to student needs within the context of school community demographics.

Miles Morgan, Australia (2003) in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development quoted research identifying that children start to rule out options at an early age because of the unconscious influences of parents, their friends and the stereotyping of occupations.

Five year olds can talk about the job they want when they grow up, six to eight year olds have already begun to narrow down the number of occupations they are prepared to consider in the future (Phipps, 1995) and once these limits are set, individuals will rarely consider broader alternatives.

Dr Jim Bright at the 2006 DEC conference ‘K-4 Early Years of Schooling: Engage, Connect, Create,’ provided evidence that children form gender stereotype occupational concepts during the early years. His presentation finished with three key messages:

Engage children to develop ideas about careers from Kindergarten onwards.

Connect through a more structured and conscious approach to stimulate interests.

Create career education that is about facilitating a lifelong learning approach from Kindergarten onwards.

SCHOOL TO WORK: CAREER DEVELOPMENT CONTINUUM K-12

The Department of Education and Communities School to Work program embraced research that identifies career development as a life-long process by developing a Career Development K-12 Continuum framework. In the primary years the program recognises that children develop ideas and beliefs about the working world from family, peers and the media, which they act out and practise through play. It also emphasises the role of parents and carers in young peoples’ career planning.

Building Career Foundations

- Exploring the world of work through structured age appropriate activity and play (Early Years)
- Experiencing and researching work and career perceptions through diverse learning opportunities (Middle Years)
- Developing informed career and transition plans and taking purposeful action towards a successful transition (15-19 Year Olds)

Developing Career Perceptions

- Transition to employment and/or further education and training, working towards on-going career self-management

Actioning Career Decisions

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Successful Career Transitions

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Parents are an important part of the system of complex interrelationships that Patton and McMahon (1999) describe as influencing the career development of all individuals. They influence their children’s learning and growth through their encouragement and discipline; their assumptions and values; through raising aspirations; and through their own experiences of learning and work.

When schools embrace career-related learning and connect their student’s educational experiences to the community children gain a sense of what they could do in the future, they experience social engagement, a sense of belonging and they have an increased capacity to network with others, building the belief that they can create a positive future.

Liaison with the local high school, encouraging parental involvement and learning, ensuring that career concepts are incorporated in teaching programs, building staff capability and strong executive leadership are the ingredients that have driven career-related learning throughout the school curriculum at all three primary schools.

Key to these journeys has been the establishment of early thinking and attitudes that will better enable children to envisage, aspire to, and achieve productive futures as members of society.

The career development initiative in each of the primary schools mirror the intent of the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (2006), which states that career-related learning is not about bringing a traditional careers education into primary classrooms on a formal basis but rather about building informally on children's natural curiosity and their existing perceptions of work roles. It is complementary to the curriculum in that children learn about the working world through subjects such as history, geography and science, linking learning to life and developing personal management, learning and work exploration and career building skills.

The drivers of these initiatives have generally been local. However the career development principles upon which they are built are supported by research and pursuant policy and practice at state, national and international levels. The current NSW Department of Education and Communities reforms being implemented across the state provide both intellectual and resource support for primary school principals to explore the potential of integrated career-related learning and move forward to implement it within their schools.

“From 2014, primary schools will be assisted to work together on strategies to broaden the career aspirations of primary students…” (Rural and Remote Education: A blueprint for action, NSW DEC 2013)

The emergence of career-related learning in primary schools has occurred as teachers provide authentic learning activities that help students to create visions of the world of work, and develop their personal skills, employability skills and career perceptions within the primary curriculum.

**Journeys demonstrating principles of good practice**

**CAREER-RELATED LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE**

- Leadership
- Situational Analysis
- Curriculum Integration
- Teacher Professional Learning
- Resource Development
- School Collaborations
- Community Connections
- Parent Engagement
- Improving Student Outcomes
- Sustainability
Journeys demonstrating principles of good practice (cont.)

Leadership

Teachers and principals agreed that the success of the career-related learning was driven by the vision, energy and passion of school leaders and the manner in which they enabled others. Narelle Armour, Principal of Toukley Public School, reflected that for career-related learning to thrive, schools need a leader and an executive team with passion for the project.

“Tangible, vocal principal support is vital and an attitude that ‘this is going to happen’. There needs to be an expectation that teachers will incorporate careers in all programs, not as an add-on.” (Toukley PS)

Essential in this leadership was the ability to:

- Articulate and be an exponent of career-related learning
- Develop school policy including accountability and evaluation processes
- Provide access to school resources to allow teachers to plan, program and learn
- Endow permission and provide executive support for teachers implementing career-related learning
- Build genuine links with local primary and high schools
- Establish links with business and community agencies
- Provide professional learning and contemporary research material for staff.

Situational analysis

The nature of the local community and the resulting needs of students underpinned each of the projects showcased at the symposium and dictated the direction each project took. Information derived from all levels of government, appreciation of local issues and needs, school data and the shared knowledge of teachers, students and their families provided clear understanding of how career-related learning could benefit students.

Within the Kurri Kurri Learning Community the impetus to integrate career-related learning in the primary setting through the program Kick Starting Career Education resulted from analysis of student enrolment. Data from 1983 to 2008 clearly indicated a long-term pattern of low retention through to Year 12. Students were choosing to leave school at the end of Year 10 after completing their School Certificate or during the course of Year 11. Whilst data indicated that very few student leavers moved directly into unemployment, concerns were raised that career outcomes of these early leavers were not being maximised.

A group of five primary schools, a local high school and community representatives set out to improve student retention to Year 12. The K-12 Career Development Continuum was developed utilising the NSW Department of Education and Communities’ School to Work Program: Career Development Continuum K-12. The Kurri Kurri K-12 Career Development Continuum communicated identified local career learning activities across the primary and secondary years and it informed transition programs between Year 6 and Year 7.

At Tweed Heads South Public School Jessica Smith, Highly Accomplished Teacher (HAT) and Meryl Toop, worked with a colleague teacher, Fallon Purkiss to create the careers education program ASPIRE (Aspirational Students Performing in Relevant Education) that was integrated into the school curriculum. Opportunity arose for university visits for Stage 3 students in 2011 and the development of a Careers Market Day. This initiative was embraced by other primary schools in 2013 with three careers markets involving 28 schools occurring across the North Coast.

Curriculum integration

The success of career-related learning in the primary setting has originated from the programs being part of the mainstream curriculum, integrated into class and school programs, and used as a vehicle for learning across the curriculum. Curriculum mapping and use of existing national and state career resources were key features of the implementation processes of each school where programs and units of work were linked to curriculum outcomes and embedded in the culture of the school.

The ASPIRE program, envisioned and developed on the North Coast aims to raise the aspirations of Stage 3 students in public schools by incorporating career-related learning across the curriculum areas using a unit of work linked to the National Curriculum and new NSW Syllabus Documents. The unit has a strong focus on literacy and numeracy and is the basis for learning conversations with parents especially around Personalised Learning Plans.

Career events such as visits to university, TAFE and other training organisations, careers markets and parent meetings supplement the formal curriculum.
Teacher professional development

In each of the career-related learning initiatives professional learning and staff commitment have been integral to program success. Learning opportunities were provided through:

- Developing a culture and rhetoric that ‘careers are everyone’s business’
- Explicit teacher professional learning about community demography and careers education built into staff meetings and school development days
- Reflective practice sessions, shared practice and evaluation
- Links and collaborative partnerships with business
- Induction and orientation of new staff
- Data collection, use of corporate data and its analysis
- Distributed leadership (not ‘ownership’) enabling team leaders to build their capacity.

“Career teaching strategies have been reviewed in teacher professional learning sessions with discussion focussing on using excursions, visiting speakers and artists, appropriate texts and reading material, opportunities in the local community and immediate neighbourhood as well as having direct career lessons.” (Toukley PS)

Resource development

Schools identified that locating and accessing relevant and adaptable resources, relevant to a primary setting was imperative if career-related learning was to be effectively integrated into the curriculum. The provision of time to allow teachers to program, and adapt and develop learning resources was also vital.

Both state and federal education departments provide a variety of hard copy and online resources that are appropriate for young learners. Access to expert careers personnel and relevant research was also identified as important in the career education journey of teachers.

School collaborations

The value of communities of schools sharing ideas, data, programs and resources; planning curriculum initiatives and events; creating connections to support students in the transition to high school; or aligning career related learning from Kindergarten to Year 12 is evident in the benefits that have accrued for teachers, students and families in the symposium schools.

The Kindergarten to Year 12 career development framework developed by the Kurri Kurri Learning Community used the School to Work Career Development Continuum (2007) to communicate career-related learning activities across the primary and secondary years and to inform transition programs between Year 6 and Year 7.

A similar continuum was developed collaboratively at Toukley Public School where the “Make It Real Game” in the Real Game Series bridged the transition from primary to secondary schooling with students commencing the Game in Year 6 and completing it after moving to their high school.

The ASPIRE program is a collaboration between NSW Far North Coast DEC primary schools, high schools, local universities and TAFE. The Tweed Education and Industry Forum fosters support for ASPIRE among local businesses, community organisations and employment agencies. Local high schools attend career market days showing students that their career journey includes progression to high school. Additionally it is a promotional opportunity to showcase the secondary environment and curriculum securing student transition to the local high school.

Community connections

Integral to career related learning K-6 is the ability to liaise with the community so that children can see their community at work, the relevance of what they are learning to the world outside school, and the opportunity to discover and explore that world.

Ian Reeson, the new principal of Tweed Heads South PS was highly supportive of the ASPIRE program, which he believes has empowered parents and students, created links with the local high school, university, TAFE and other community and business organisations.

Business involvement in the ASPIRE careers market was motivated because:

- Students are seen as their future workforce
- The market raises the community profile of each business
- Attendance can improve market share through customer connections
- There is also the opportunity for businesses to develop partnerships
- Businesses in the local area see the market as a chance to ‘pay back’ to community.

Parental engagement

Developing strong partnerships with parents allowed Symposium schools to breakdown barriers between families and the school. Parents/carers gained confidence to work with the school. They have provided feedback on the school’s programs, engaged in deep conversations about their child’s learning. They are involved in career-related learning and its supplementary activities such as excursions, visiting speakers, and are also studying in TAFE courses provided through the school.

“Home, school, community partnerships around engagement in learning underpin achieving higher outcomes for kids. Partnerships imply much more than getting parents to ‘just stand in a school’. There are many ways to engage families and the school must work through the discomfort to do so. It is absolutely vital to open up conversations at home.” (Toukley PS)

Student outcomes

Career-related learning assists primary students to explore who they are and what they can do in the future.
Through career-related learning experiences they can develop identity, a sense of belonging and ideas about their future roles in society. It provides purpose for learning, improves student engagement in learning and with the school and their community. Most importantly builds aspiration about future learning and life choices, and the capacity to identify, explore and manage career and life decisions. Thus it has the potential to overcome disadvantage and parental lack of aspiration for their children to complete school and engage in further education.

Stacey Mathieson, Assistant Principal at Kurri Kurri Public School, awarded the Judith Leeson National Career Education Award 2009 for her role in leading career education noted, “We are exposing our children to different work choices, different lifestyles, and hopefully a successful future.”

Sustainability

Sustainability of career-related learning in the primary school context relies on developing effective policy and practices, a culture of commitment to career related learning, continuous improvement of its implementation, the induction of new teachers and ownership that is shared across the school and its community.

Symposium schools identified that developing strategies to measure short term and longitudinal impact will be vital in assessing program success and the future directions career-related learning will take at their schools. A study tracking current primary students through to the completion of Stage 6 and beyond would also provide data for reflection. Ian Reeson incoming Principal at South Tweed Heads PS commented that as a new principal he had walked into a well-developed program fuelled by enthusiasm. He is now searching for ‘measurable impact’ indicators and evidence to assess career-related learning effectiveness both to justify the monetary expenditure to sustain the program and to seek funding for its development.

The opportunity to establish a virtual, state wide learning community of primary schools and local management groups who are developing career-related learning initiatives was suggested at the symposium as the basis for future collaborations and the exchange of ideas and information.

The benefits of career-related learning in primary schools

School leaders and teachers who participated in the 2013 Symposium were able to identify anecdotal and observable benefits of career-related learning initiatives for their students and school communities. Their observations are reflected in contemporary research and will resonate with all educators committed to the current and future wellbeing of their students.
Deeper engagement in learning

Evidence suggests, and the symposium schools related that children engaged more deeply in learning because they:

- Connected what they were learning in school to real-world situations.
- Discovered the variety of jobs available to them and were able to imagine themselves in these occupations.
- Could see how education connected to a successful future.

"The potential for career related learning to motivate children and make their learning more relevant to them is an important contribution to tackling social exclusion." (National Career Development Strategy 2013)

Positive self-image, self-awareness and personal values

Learning about the world of work in primary schools involves expanding the worldview of children outside the classroom, building a child’s self-image and developing personal values that will underpin their successful future community participation. (Senior Pathways: Creating Visions of the World of Work in Primary Schools 2007)

These personal values include confidence; coping with change; optimism for the future; resilience; perseverance; and receptiveness to new learning, which are the keys to success developed in You Can Do It Education, a social and emotional learning program for student achievement and wellbeing.

Generic employment related skills

The focus on career discovery in career-related learning fosters authentic learning activities that help children to develop positive relationships and the employability skills identified from Employability Skills for the Future. (Business Council of Australia / Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002)

NSW DEC added ‘Cross Cultural Understanding’ and titled them, ‘The Employment Related Skills’.

- Self Management
- Initiative and Enterprise
- Learning
- Communication
- Teamwork
- Planning and Organising
- Problem Solving
- Technology
- Cross Cultural Understanding

Career knowledge, perception and aspiration

Learning about the variety of work people do allows children to create visions of what careers they may want in the future, allowing them to envisage, aspire to, and ultimately achieve productive futures as members of society.

Enhancing children's personal development, career development and career management equips them to make informed decisions, and benefits society as children become more aware of opportunities available to them, influencing them to aim high and complete their education.

Collaboration among primary schools and their local high schools

Using the School to Work Career Development Continuum (2007) and career-related learning practices Local Management Groups (LMG), networks of schools and alliances of principals have the opportunity to develop and strengthen relationships between primary schools and their local high schools through collaborative planning and action.

"We initiated the Career Lighthouse Program as a strategy to increase the retention rates at Kurri Kurri High School and developed a continuum of career activity from primary school to high school." (Lesley Doran, Deputy Principal Kurri Kurri PS.)

These partnerships can fuel curriculum, transition and professional learning collaborations leading to better outcomes for students, schools and communities.

Community connection, awareness, belonging and citizenship

When children learn about community helpers, go on a school excursion or listen to experts speaking about their field of employment they develop an understanding of the relationship between work and society. Some children’s literature also explores career concepts. All of this enables children to construct their own career understandings and awareness of their place in the community.
Career development in primary schools is also an important aspect of citizenship development; it is a lifelong process that can be effectively addressed with all age groups. (Senior Pathways: Creating Visions of the World of Work in Primary Schools 2007)

Combating social disadvantage through parent engagement and participation

Each of the schools represented at the symposium developed their programs to address aspects of disadvantage that were evident among their students and in their school communities and drew on funding derived from either Priority Schools Program, the National Partnerships programs supporting disadvantaged communities and/or the Australian Government Career Education Lighthouse Schools Project.

Central to achieving the best student outcomes possible from the career-related learning programs was the common focus among symposium schools on engaging and encouraging the participation of parents through meetings, career markets, excursions, classroom visits and in adult learning programs. Teachers at the symposium reflected that the authentic involvement of families was essential to the processes of awareness enhancement and increased aspiration, supporting each child to experience a successful educational journey.

"Integral to building this foundation is a focus on supporting parents, and others who provide young people with informal career advice and support.” (National Career Development Strategy 2013)

From a government and economic perspective in the long run career development assists workforce preparation, adaptability, sustainability and reintegration and so increased workforce participation rates, reduced costs, increased efficiency and productivity.

The Way Forward

Career-related learning in primary schools should be implemented as a considered, explicit and strategic process that includes the following:

- **Leadership provided by the Principal** informed through school community aspirations for their young people and research-based evidence (local and international).
- **Career development embedded in school policy** and supported by the school’s executive.
- **Formation of a working party of interested stakeholders, including parents and community members, to develop a strategic plan.**
- **Student outcomes clearly identified and articulated.**
- **Career education integrated into formal curriculum delivery** and reflected in the provision of authentic learning activities.
- **Resources identified and developed to support career-related learning implementation.**
- **Teacher professional learning developed and implemented.**
- **Collaboration with local high schools** to develop a K-12 career development continuum that supports a smooth transition between Year 6 and Year 7.
- **Establishment of monitoring, review and evaluation processes** to inform continuous improvement and reporting to stakeholders.

The time is right for the reconceptualization of career-related learning through primary to secondary school. Current DEC reforms and initiatives including ‘Rural and Remote Education: A blueprint for action’; ‘Local Schools, Local Decisions’; ‘Every Student, Every School’; ‘Great Teaching, Inspired Learning’; and ‘Strengthening Family and Community Engagement’ provide an opportunity for new thinking about how career-related learning integrates with state strategies, Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards outcomes and other NSW DEC priorities.

Career-related learning in primary schools offers the opportunity for principals to assure the future wellbeing of students, enhance the communities in which they live and meet not only DEC expectations but also those embodied in Goal 2 of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians which states:

“All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active informed citizens.”

(The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Schooling for Young Australians, Goal 2, 2008)

### CAREER-RELATED LEARNING RESOURCES

To access resources that support career-related learning in primary schools, including materials developed by the schools in this article go to the Senior Pathways website at: [https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/schoolowtowork/teachers/executive.html](https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/vetinschools/schoolowtowork/teachers/executive.html)

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