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When theory and practice are combined, the fruit of this convergence is enlightenment

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Title: Elim Christian College's experience of using a possible selves approach to career guidance – an action research experience

This presentation will outline Elim's experience of using a possible selves based career guidance program (FutureSelves). Using an action research perspective it outlines a shift toward use with younger students where needs are more pronounced, a shift from one on one to class wide use, building closer ties with the rest of school and parents, identifying at risk students and adapting a tiered approach to scaling the level and delivery of advice based on student need. Barriers and techniques to integrate careers in school life are also discussed. Institutions can aggregate data on what learners hope, fear and expect. This helps institutions tailor teaching to better meet student needs.

Introduction

This presentation describes how Elim Christian College has evolved its use of FutureSelves to better meet the needs of its community and students. Elim is a state integrated special character area school situated in the suburb of Botany Downs in Howick.

As a Christian school it believes strongly in enabling students to use their God-given talents to achieve their goals. It believes in having a rich relationship with students. To do this it needs to know its students well – i.e. have rich information about them. It also believes strongly in having meaningful relationships with parents and engaging with them about what counts in their children's lives.

This presentation explains why and how Elim came to use the idea of possible selves, which is the core concept of the FutureSelves product. The presentation outlines lessons learnt along Elim's action research journey. During this journey the careers department

has at times had to think hard about what it is making available to students and if this was the best on offer. Improvement has occurred from past learning experiences, and learners have begun to think about themselves and their future in more rounded ways. Parents have also learnt new things about their children. FutureSelves, the program developers, have also had many learning experiences. It hasn't been easy but it has been worth it.

Elim chose to use FutureSelves for a number of reasons – it wanted to reduce the number of students changing courses in senior secondary, and address the needs of disengaged students who didn't know what to do, and couldn't be bothered doing 'it'. Elim was also interested in a new, more personal way, of engaging parents in children's education through career guidance. Of course it also wanted to better meet other stakeholder expectations– such as parents and government regulators. Generally, both stakeholders rightfully push schools for better careers advice so that students see a point in studying.

Behind all these specific challenges facing the school and its stakeholders was the deeper problem that careers were a bit isolated from normal school life. Careers was done 'down the corridor'. This physical isolation represented a disconnect for students between long term career choices and short term behaviour and course selection. For educators it meant a disconnect between what you were teaching, why you were teaching it, and who you were teaching it to. As the students didn't know themselves well, or where they were going, teachers also found it hard to know their students and adapt teaching strategies accordingly (Hattie, 2009). Working with learners possible selves, represented through the FutureSelves program, was identified as a potential solution to these problems.

Possible selves are the thoughts, images and senses that people have of their future (Markus & Nurius 1986). Unlike traditional views of people as having a single personality, possible selves theory sees people as having multiple selves, but with a core self concept. Those selves can be both positive and negative (hopes and fears); and people vary in their confidence or anxiety that those hopes and fears will become true. Possible selves deal with the 'total person' – they include family and relationships, identities, emotions, beliefs, values, skills and interests.

Possible selves help career development in several ways (Meara, Day, Chalk, and Phelps, 1995). As possible selves are personalized and intensely individual, they reflect matters such as efficacy, values, and personalized meanings. They provide a way of testing, and making aspirations much more real, and feel much truer.

Because they are often highly vivid, they often carry salient and elaborated self concepts that are personally motivating, such as a student's vivid image of a graduation ceremony. The third characteristic is that they are laden with emotions such as happiness or insecurity, which can be personalized goals in themselves (Winell, 1987).

These emotions can give meaning, energy, and can become goals in themselves. People look forward to positive emotions and try to avoid negative ones.

Possible selves also contain the strategies and tactics to achieve career goals. They build schema, or thought processes, that enable effective processing of information and knowledge and strategies to achieve them (Meara, Day, Chalk, and Phelps, 1995). Having a clear possible self often carries with it “mental software,” called schema, to help a person become that self. They also provide avoidance goals (fears), which can be motivating (particularly for at risk young people (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). People find it easier to avoid a fear coming true if they have an alternative to hope for. And fears can be a good reality check.

Feared possible selves can be debilitating if they are seen as likely or inevitable. Addressing fears, but focussing on strengths, seems valuable considering the anxiety that accompanies career matters. One of the career related benefits of possible selves is that the self focussed view it entails builds empathy between the career practitioner and client.

FutureSelves – a practical application of possible selves

FutureSelves applies possible selves through an adaptive framework depending on the schools and students needs and preferences. It tends to include teaching resources such as lesson plans, a web based questionnaire, questionnaire results, and workbooks. Schools use aggregated questionnaire results to scan and respond to student motivations, and the fit between their aspirations and what the school offers.

Regardless of what mix of resources are used schools tend to follow the following sequence when using FutureSelves. The method has evolved over time, and it varies, but at a high level it always follows these stages

1. **Engaging-** and setting expectations. This often done through a presentation and discussion, followed by students going through the online questionnaire.
2. **Focussing-** on what counts and what has happened. This involves interpreting questionnaire results, and reflecting on them. Questionnaire results are mapped graphically and vividly to provide gateways to insight rather than diagnosis. Reflections are often expressed in a workbook.
3. **Deciding-** On whom to be, rather than what to do. This includes collecting world of work information to determine best career paths and using workbooks that help address barriers, and finding a fit with ones background, important social identities and communities.
4. **Planning-** for course selection , personal development, and relationships with families and communities
5. **Implementing-** the plan and getting feedback along the way.

Method

Action research describes the cycle of reflection, planning, action and observation that took place at Elim. Many of you will know that schools do not always lend themselves to tidy research stages – such stages tend to be more emergent with hindsight than visible at the time. Change tends to be more iterative than structured. However, the research process described here did aspire to principles common in the Kurt Lewin inspired action research literature – the importance of addressing practical problems, that decisions should be based on facts, and that deeper root causes should be sought and responded to (Lewin, 1952). The action research and formative evaluation literatures both emphasise user interests, multiple methods and incremental improvements. These were our emphases too.

In the research that follows two main cycles are described – one concerning its use with years 11 – 13, and then later, transferring the application to years 9 & 10. There were also several ‘mini cycles’ as adjustments were made to programmes, which reflect the messiness of real life in schools. The traditional approach to action research of *reflect, plan, act, observe, reflect and planning* for another cycle is used here.

The first cycle years 11- 13

Reflection – centred on three domains – the Elim institution, learners, and the careers advisor. As earlier described, Elim saw a need for a career approach that fitted the school’s Christian ethos and that impacted the whole person - intellectually, socially, physically and spiritually. For learners, we sought enriched information in order to respond to the lack of direction we saw in some older students, despite an active pastoral approach. Reflecting as a relatively novice careers advisor I (Chayya) sought something that would help me in my relatively new role, and also fit with my empathic teaching style as someone who talked *with* rather than *at* learners. Reflecting as a science teacher, I sought reliable information.

Within Elim there was no clear careers guidance plan. Online careers services software told students about the world of work, but little about themselves. The students seemed unable to make good use of this world of work information because they did not have the self knowledge needed to process it effectively, such as by deciding what really interested them. A traditional one on one approach was often time consuming and seemed to lack a clear goal or outcome. These reflections led to the FutureSelves adoption.

Plan – As the curriculum was already crowded, a pastoral approach was already strong in the school, and the lack of direction was confined to a minority of students, a traditional one on one careers approach for years 11- 13 was planned – a traditional

career practice approach. FutureSelves was expected to speed up and add depth to the traditional one on one approach.

Act –FutureSelves was implemented at Elim in 2005. With the one-to –one counselling I managed to see approximately 100 students in 2005.

Within this action phase three mini action research cycles took place. The first concerned a Dean referral system for at risk youth. The second concerned seeing all year 13s, and the third concerned parent engagement.

It was initially voluntary for the students to see the careers advisor but this was ineffective. Often the students' least needing careers advice were the ones who sought it, and those most in need never came. In 2006 Deans were appointed, provided a point of contact and consultation between careers advice and cohorts. At risk students were identified, referred to me, and plans made with the students. No formal evaluation of this took place but I did notice three things: Deans referred more and more students, hard to reach referred students started knocking on my door for repeat visits, and I heard good reports from teachers about changed behaviours.

The second mini cycle was that in 2006 compulsory one-to one interviews starting with year 13s commenced. Some senior students had already 'done' FutureSelves. For these students results would be revisited. Quite often student thoughts and ideas about their futures had changed. Students would re-sit the online questionnaire, discuss how goal posts had shifted, and what further information was required. Students would take away tasks, and further meetings would be set up for a few weeks later. The takeaway tasks tended to be around labour market knowledge such as job profiles and market trends. Self knowledge would emerge very quickly from the online questionnaire and subsequent reflection and discussion.

The third mini cycle concerned discussing FutureSelves questionnaire results with parents - when parents requested it and students permitted results to be shared. It helped bridge the communication gap - where parents and students may have different views of career paths. The FutureSelves results provided an agenda to discuss personalised matters in a structured and coherent way. It gave voice to students and helped parents to think about their children in new ways.

Observe – By the end of 2006 several observations could be made. In a nutshell students had positive experiences when they went through the program but it took up a lot of time. Scheduling was difficult with all year 13s and other busy senior students. Going through the questionnaire takes about 40 minutes, followed by one and sometimes two career counselling sessions. At this time we also became aware of many younger students (year 11s) changing their course options after term one. We saw the high number of students changing as a signal that students needed to start thinking earlier

about their future goals and dreams. We also know that many at that age need a motivator to work towards.

Concurrently, life skills classes – part of the Year 9 and 10 students health and wellbeing program - were struggling. Staff turnover was high, activities used were not motivating for students, and the supplier was phasing out the existing careers resource.

Reflect –The dilemma Elim faced was how to get the results we wanted from FS, but in the most efficient way. The core of the problem was that common school tension between building meaningful, positive relationships with students, but with very limited time. We reflected that addressing problems at a younger age would save costs and problems at older ages. The Years 9 & 10 careers component of life skills needed a fresh start.

The second cycle - Years 9 & 10

Plan and action – Consequently we decided to use it with younger students – in Years 9 and 10. The initial design was that once senior students have left school in term 4, years 9 and 10 were provided with usernames and passwords to access this online tool at school. It usually took a period for them to complete the online test.

On a separate day the careers advisor would spend time with the students teaching them how to read their reports. These reports are also taken away for closer scrutiny by the guidance team to pick out any cases of pastoral issues which may be implied from the test results. The lifestyle and personal values and beliefs sections of the questionnaire results signal risk levels.

The information obtained through FutureSelves was used together with information available on careers services websites on job profiles. Workbooks were used to help students focus on, decide, plan and implement possible futures based on the results. Usually, this was spread over 2 – 3 further sessions. The results would be kept for the following year and unpacked in greater detail with the year 10s together with the FutureSelves hip hop booklet in the life skills classes.

Observe - FutureSelves helped bring to light cases of student unhappiness and discontentment with school or personal life. These cases would otherwise not have been known until reflected in poorer behaviours. The guidance team would take over the managing of these students.

Students were more engaged. Their enthusiasm was evident through the initiatives taken to step beyond life skills classes and seek further information from the careers advisor. They had substantial new 'evidence' about themselves that they explored in depth. For instance, they applied skills and interests to new sport, hobby and academic interests. It also seemed to fill a vacuum - because other career resources were

unavailable students quickly bought into the future selves way of careers counselling and obtaining information on themselves. Some students seek further testing – parents occasionally buy them psychometric testing.

Reflect

The program has evolved considerably since it began, and it will continue to evolve. What we haven't covered in the preceding account is how resources such as lesson plans and workbooks have improved. They reflect the progress FutureSelves has made - which has been its own 'action learning' journey of trial and error. Since the initial training I am able to delve deeper into student concerns and establish a good repertoire. Knowing that all info shared will be kept confidential is important.

Conclusion

A blended, possible selves based approach has been an informative and affordable option for students and the careers department. The school and careers advisor can track cohorts of students, tailor subject choices to student needs, identify crucial information about at-risk students. These system wide issues take careers from being 'down the corridor' to being an important part of school life – the purpose and plans for students time in school.

This need for systematic integration of careers in school life is perhaps not done as often as should, despite exhortations that it should take place (e.g. Krumboltz, 1994; <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?pl=325&sl=133&contentid=240>). There seem to be many practical barriers to such integration happening, including time, cost, and perhaps some territory issues in some schools. The blended approach, which uses technology to gather holistic information, and class and one on one time to develop reflection and insight, may be one way of building this integration. The ability to efficiently identify at risk students and provide tiered support according to student needs may be a means for careers advisors to demonstratively add value by making the life of teachers in class easier.

This project could have been improved with more accurate and detailed data collection to aid decision making. Although schools are inherently messy, which makes research hard to do, more data on student progress, and teacher and parent experience would improve program design. Overall, this research demonstrates that a structured and blended possible selves based approach that addresses the 'total person', targeted systematically to younger students making course selection decisions, can help learners, careers advisors and schools.

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