

The Use of Genograms in Career Counseling With Elementary, Middle, and High School Students

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Genograms have been used successfully in career counseling with adults; however, there has been limited use of genograms in career counseling with elementary, middle, and high school children. This article focuses on the benefits of using genograms and the reasons for them to be integrated into the comprehensive developmental guidance programs used by professional school counselors.

The emergence and implementation of comprehensive developmental guidance programs in the United States have reemphasized the developmental nature of career education, which has now been more integrated into the curriculum of elementary and middle schools (Morrow-Taylor, Folz, Ellis, & Culbertson, 1999). The conceptual foundation of the comprehensive developmental guidance program is *life career development*, which is defined as "self-development over a person's life span through the integration of the roles, settings, and events in a person's life" (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, p. 49). This emphasis on career education is timely, considering that research indicates children may identify with adult workers in their lives and that they specifically identify more with the mother's occupation than with the father's occupation (Trice & Knapp, 1992). Hence, occupational aspirations may form early in a child's life. In addition, Hossler and Maple (1993), Mau (1995), and Ramos and Sanchez (1995) have found that parental expectations and support are key variables influencing college aspirations among students of color, and this influence may be felt as early as junior high school in many cases.

Because parental expectations and role models influence career aspirations and educational decisions, examining family dynamics, roles, and values with students in elementary, middle, and high school settings can be beneficial in helping students master the competencies in the comprehensive developmental guidance programs in order to reach their goals. One tool that can be used at all of these levels is the career genogram (Heppner, O'Brien, Hinkelman, & Humphrey, 1994; Moon, Coleman, McCollum, Nelson, & Jensen-Scott, 1993; Okiishi, 1987; Okocha, 1998).

The use of genograms in career counseling provides the child and counselor a nonthreatening method of assessing and discussing the career patterns in the child's family. The ability to be flexible with this type of assessment

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offers many advantages, including the ability of the counselor to adapt the genogram process to the developmental needs of the client. In supervising school counselors-in-training at all school levels, I have instructed students about how to use career genograms and have noted the flexibility of this tool. From creating to processing, using genograms in career counseling can be tailored to the individual child within the school setting.

Career Genograms in Elementary School Developmental Guidance Programs

The general career goal that is outlined in comprehensive developmental guidance programs for the elementary school student is gaining career awareness (Zunker, 2002). Gaining career awareness encompasses the student's awareness of personal characteristics, interests, aptitudes, skills, and diversity of the world of work. Through classroom guidance activities, individual counseling, and small-group activities, students from kindergarten through fifth grade can gain competencies in career awareness. At this level, the use of the career genogram or career family tree addresses competencies of identifying different types of work and workers in different settings, defining work/career, identifying careers in the community, identifying gender similarities and differences in work choices, describing responsibilities at home and school as work related, identifying career clusters, describing how choices are made and relating decision making to career choices, and identifying work and skills of family members (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003).

Parents have influence on their children's early career and educational aspirations (Hossler & Maple, 1993; Mau, 1995; Ramos & Sanchez, 1995). This type of influence is an indication that parents may be the most influential role models for their children (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Many parents may, however, be unaware of how influential they are in their children's lives, especially as the influence relates to career awareness.

Whiston and Sexton (1998) advocated educating parents of elementary-age children and raising their awareness about their influence in the area of career. Parents should not only be encouraged to participate in career guidance activities, but they should also participate in career assessment activities that examine the family's career history. One such activity, a family tree highlighting the family members' occupations and aspirations, is a spin-off of the career genogram (Gysbers & Moore, 1987; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000).

The career family tree, or occupational tree, is a good choice for the elementary school child because the graphic representation of the tree is appealing at these age levels. With this exercise, only three generations are typically represented in order to make the representation physically and intellectually simple for children to handle. This assignment can be given in classroom guidance lessons, individual counseling sessions, or small groups. Based on my personal experience, it is easier to work either individually or in small groups with the younger children and in large group guidance lessons with older children. The school counselor is encouraged to prepare a tree template to distribute (see Figure 1). The children should be encouraged to add more information if they can re-



FIGURE 1

Career Family Tree

member it and if time allows. Although the assignment is given at school, it should be completed at home with families. Hence, one of the primary goals is to begin the communication process between parents and children about career-related events and thoughts.

In preparing children to complete the assignment, school counselors should give specific instructions. The following instructions are suggested, based on my experience with children. First, encourage children to complete part of the career family tree during the class, individual session, or small group. This allows the counselor to determine how much each child knows about his or her family prior to interviewing family members. An example of oral directions for students could include

I would like for each of you to make a tree of your family. You will include your sisters and/or brothers at the bottom with your name. On this side of the page (point to the left), you will write your father's name, and his parents' names. On this side of the page (point to the right), you will write your mother's name, and her parents' names.

Allow them time to complete this first step.

The second set of instructions focuses on occupations in the family: "Next to each person's name, please write what he or she does for a

living (provide them with examples of what you are asking).” School counselors are encouraged to modify these instructions for children living with a single parent or guardians. For example, children living in a situation that does not allow them contact with their family of origin can make a tree of their present living situation that can include role models and foster parents or two trees to represent the different living situations.

Second, the school counselor should encourage creativity in the activity. Using color and different shapes allows children flexibility in how they conceive of careers in their families. For example, family members may be represented by different colors or symbols on the tree. In addition, children could be encouraged to draw their own tree as part of the project. Third, counselors should set up a time frame for the completion of the activity. Allowing a week may be optimal because of busy family schedules and a need to promote communication between child and family on career issues. Fourth, a letter to the parents that accompanies the activity should state the activity’s purpose and goal. In the letter, reiterating the time frame, instructions for completion (similar to the verbal directions stated previously), and contact information of the counselor may be included.

Finally, the information presented on the career family tree should be processed when the tree is completed. Questions for processing can include the following: What does your mom do for a living? What does your dad do for a living? What does grandma or grandpa do for a living? What do people do in those types of jobs (the ones that are named)? Can men *and* women do that kind of work? Why or why not? Why did your mom or dad choose that type of work? What does your sister or brother do for work? What do you do for work? Can chores at home be considered work? Why or why not? Taking into consideration the setting, the school counselor may have children work together to share their trees, or the child’s experience of creating the tree can be processed at the individual level with the counselor. Working together allows students to see clusters of similar work options. In addition, the school counselor may host a special session to which the parents of the children are invited and during which they can process the information together with their children, using discussion questions similar to the ones given earlier.

Overall, the use of career family trees is a good beginning point for enhancing children’s career awareness. The activity promotes communication between children and family members, and it teaches various self-assessment and interviewing techniques that will help children in their career development. Learning these techniques will prepare elementary school children for the career exploration processes that begin in middle school.

Career Genograms in Middle School Developmental Guidance Programs

Middle school students, in essence, start their career exploration process during the elementary school years. This exploration process consists of awareness activities and is developmentally appropriate for the elementary school age group. However, middle school students are more actively involved in understanding the elements involved in career exploration. Understanding the meaning of formal and informal career assessments becomes more the goal at this level. The process of facilitating career exploration

in middle school is to help students learn how to find and understand information about themselves and the world of work.

During the middle school years, students are involved in more formal assessments of their career interests, aptitudes, and abilities (Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Typically, the middle school counselor will begin the process of the career portfolio for each student. This portfolio is a folder of documented career-related activities in which the student has been involved in the school setting, and the portfolio will follow the student through middle school to high school graduation. The career genogram is an informal tool that allows students to meet guidance program competencies such as identifying personal interests and abilities, identifying traditional and nontraditional occupations, identifying secondary and postsecondary opportunities in the local community, and defining the education and training opportunities needed to achieve career goals (ASCA, 2003).

In focusing on these competencies, the middle school counselor can use the career genogram in a variety of ways. First, counselors can have students expand on their career family trees if they created these during their elementary school education. The school counselor is, however, cautioned not to make assumptions about the child and his or her family based on the career tree that was previously created. To facilitate the process, the counselor may want to dedicate time to allow the children to update their career family trees for any additions and/or changes in their families. Additional time should be dedicated to processing the information contained in these trees, such as asking each student to briefly present his or her tree and what he or she has learned about careers. The student may be asked to speak about any changes that have occurred and how those changes have affected the child's interests in academic and career pursuits. In processing the information in the old and the revised career family trees, the counselor can learn about the children's perceptions of their family, interests, and careers. However, school counselors need to be aware that processing the information presented in the career family trees can reveal emotions or thoughts that students attempt to conceal on a daily basis, and the student may not be ready to deal with those thoughts or emotions publicly at the time. For example, one of my internship students identified a strong value of attaining higher education in the family career tree of the intern's middle school client. The value is excellent, but it was placing a great deal of pressure on the client to excel, although the client was not complaining. Being careful not to make this an issue for the client, the intern increased the academic and emotional support for the client in the school environment.

If the children did not create a career family tree, then counselors can make this an assignment or can instruct them on how to create a career genogram (see Figure 2). Instructions by school counselors and/or teachers at this level may include "We are going to create a type of family history that we can see." For sixth grade, the verbal and written directions are similar to the ones provided at the elementary school level. However, homework questions to family members can be expanded to include the topics of type of job, hobby, education, and reasons for choosing the career. For this group, counselors and teachers can use the career family tree diagram or provide an example for students to use to draw their own tree.

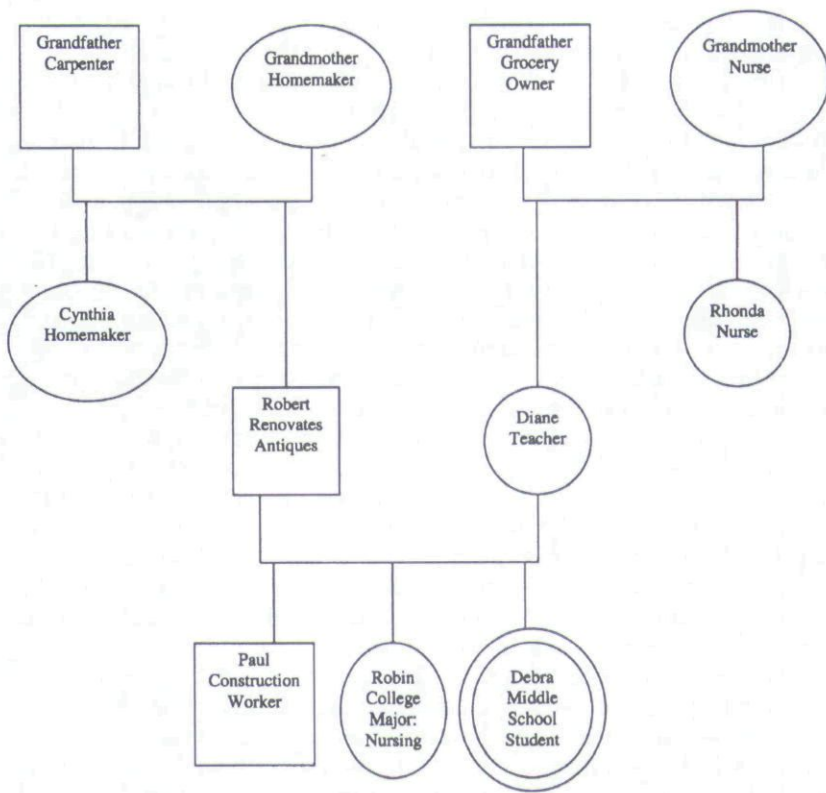


FIGURE 2

Career Genogram Example

Different instructions are required when using the career genogram format instead of the career family tree. For seventh- and eighth-grade students, using the genogram diagram requires an explanation of the shapes and lines. The instructions for these groups can include

Today, each person will draw a visual representation of his or her family. This is called a genogram (show example). On this genogram, the squares represent males in your family, circles represent females, and the lines represent the type of relationship between the people. You will first start by drawing you and your brothers and/or sisters. Start with the eldest child and put them on the left at the bottom of your page. Go from left to right, drawing oldest to youngest in your family.

As the school counselor or teacher gives instructions verbally, he or she will also demonstrate how to construct the genogram:

Next, you will draw your father and his brothers and sisters on the left side of the page above you and your brothers and sisters. Remember, draw them from left to right, oldest to youngest. You will continue to do this for your mother's side of the family.

Modifications can be made for children in single-parent homes or foster homes or who are living with guardians. The point of the exercise is for students to examine the relational influences on work and education decisions.

Second, the expansion on this assignment should encourage the children to ask parents "why" they chose their educational and career paths, "what" factors influenced their decisions, "who" influenced their decisions, and "when" they made those decisions. Third, the school counselor should provide materials, including computerized information, to help students explore the educational and work history of their families to obtain a better understanding of these different opportunities. For example, school counselors can provide Web site information, books, and computer programs to explore the careers of their family members. Finally, the expanded career genograms should be processed either individually or in small groups and be documented in the career portfolio. Questions to include in processing this information can include, but are not limited to, the following: What are the personal interests/hobbies of brothers and sisters, mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and great-grandparents? What are the traditional versus nontraditional occupations represented in your family? How is your mother's and/or father's education related to her and/or his career choice? Do your parents work in the community or must they travel outside of the community? How do your parents manage their extracurricular activities and work? Did the economy affect your parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' employment?

Assessing educational and career patterns in families with a career genogram allows students to understand how their career preferences are related to family values, interests, and opportunities. Understanding these dimensions of career can help students assess their motivation in implementing career decisions, which becomes an important component of career education in high school.

Career Genograms in High School Developmental Guidance Programs

High school career counseling involves the culmination of the awareness and exploration activities that have been fostered during students' elementary and middle school education. Using the career genogram with students in Grades 9 through 12 allows the following competencies to be addressed: identifying how personal preferences and interests influence career choices and success; applying the decision-making process to real-life situations; developing an educational plan to support career goals; and using time management skills to balance school, work, and leisure activities (ASCA, 2003).

School counselors, at this time, must support students as they explore postsecondary and education options and possibilities (Mau, Hitchcock, & Clavert, 1998; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Unfortunately, there is less time for high school counselors, compared with elementary and middle school counselors, to examine these issues on an individual and small-group basis because of the curriculum and instructional time requirements in the high school setting; therefore, many career-related educational activities are integrated into the regular curriculum.

Because the career genogram is flexible, it is an appropriate tool to integrate into regular curricula in high schools. This process encourages the school counselor and high school teachers to collaborate on curricular competencies in both the comprehensive developmental guidance program and specific subject area (e.g., English, science, math).

The main purpose of using the career genogram at this level is to examine the themes or patterns of specific motivational factors within the family for making decisions about career and education. Using genograms in this manner leads students to examine if these themes are influencing their current decisions about career and education decisions and if these decisions are appropriate for them. English and history classes may provide perfect opportunities to examine family histories. This can be a comprehensive class project that examines issues of career, education, and life decisions (e.g., marriage, divorce, births). Verbal directions similar to those given at the seventh- and eighth-grade level can be supplemented with additional information. Specifically, the directions could require students to interview at least three generations of family members about these different areas and examine the themes in all areas. Specific to career, students may be instructed to "identify the patterns of education, skills, training, work/career among their family members." Other components of the project could include drawing a career/family genogram (see Figure 2) and writing a paper about how the themes discovered in the family's history are currently influencing students' decisions. During the project, the school counselor and teacher could coteach and process these discoveries by asking the following questions: What were the patterns you discovered in your family? Are you interested in any of those areas? Where will you find more information about that area? What did the information inform you about that career? How are your interests related to that career? Will you be able to be employed in the community? Does this matter to you? How and why? How will you prioritize your personal interests in hobbies and your work-related interests?

Using the career genogram in subject curricula helps school counselors convey to teachers the importance of linking career-related activities to regular education. In addition, school counselors model the effectiveness of collaborating with other educators in meeting curricular competencies in an efficient manner. This efficiency is a benefit that encourages educators to integrate counseling activities into their class schedules.

Limitations

In integrating the use of career family trees and genograms into school counseling programs, several limitations to their use merit attention. First, the actual implementation of this type of tool in the school setting requires time, and extended periods of time are at a premium for school counselors. In order to use this tool efficiently, counselors and teachers may need to assign the initial drawing or creating of the genogram as homework and use class time to process the information in large-group settings. Using the genogram comes with the understanding that more direction should be provided to students at the elementary grade levels than is necessary for students at higher grade levels. A second limitation is the use of career family trees and genograms of children from blended

families, same-sex parents, foster families, and adopted families (Okiishi, 1987). Children, in these circumstances, should be encouraged to participate in processing the information presented in the genograms but should not be forced or penalized when they are hesitant. This may be the opportunity for the school counselor to process the genogram on an individual basis with the student. Third, teachers are not trained to process the information in the genogram adequately, so school counselors should be the leaders in processing when the genogram is assigned as a requirement. They can address the career competencies that are being met through the assignment and are trained to handle interpersonal conflicts that may occur when exploring family dynamics.

Specifically, encouragement of positive communication among family members can be promoted through the guidance of the school counselor. For example, the school counselor can model the types of questions that the student can ask his or her parents when completing the assignment. In addition, the school counselor can help students brainstorm to discover possible emotions that the assignment may elicit from families as they are involved in completing the assignment: Teachers are not trained to handle these circumstances, and school counselors can work with students and their families if questions arise from either students or their families. Fourth, the genogram is a self-report tool that comes with its own validity issues. Students may provide only a minimal amount of information or incorrect information about the family. This can occur for several reasons, including an emotional distance from family, lack of knowledge about family, or family circumstances that prevent disclosure. School counselors may decide to work with these students individually to provide the student with a more comfortable and less pressured setting to talk about the genogram and the reasons for disclosing too little or incorrect information. Finally, little attention has been given to using career genograms with school-age children. Hence, research on the use and effectiveness of this type of developmental assessment technique is needed for professional school counselors and educators to accurately plan for implementation of this tool.

Summary

Numerous benefits to using genograms in career counseling have been documented with adults but not with children; however, comprehensive developmental guidance programs in public schools provide opportunities for implementation of these techniques at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Using career family trees and career genograms promotes communication and education between children and families. In addition, the use of career family trees and career genograms allows opportunities for children to learn how to self-assess and examine family career themes that affect career decision making. The inclusion of an assessment of the family's influence on children's career-related preferences and aspirations provides essential information toward the goal of life career development, which is one of the goals of comprehensive developmental guidance programs in educational systems. Thus, career family trees and genograms help school counselors incorporate a flexible and inexpensive technique to meet program standards and competencies.

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