

# english teachers and education-employment linkages for young people

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## Career pathways

Ask a classroom of senior students what the word ‘career’ means and it’s likely they will say something like, ‘A career is something you really want to do.’ With some encouragement to explore this, they might talk about careers in developmental terms—as an expression of who they are and who they want to be. Some will know exactly what career pathway they want to pursue. Others will want to explore particular avenues connected with their interests but won’t have a clear idea of where this exploration might lead. Many will be unsure about how to proceed and some will be anxious about this lack of certainty.

This is not surprising: choosing subject options at school is difficult for many young people because their thoughts about career pathways are emergent (at most), and the post-school world can be even more perplexing, offering a very wide array of education and training choices. Even for those with some idea of the direction they want to take, making post-school choices can be daunting. How can teachers support young people in thinking about and crafting these pathways?

One traditional approach has been to encourage a young person to choose a single occupational destination that seems to be in keeping with their interests and aptitudes, and to head straight for it.

But this may not be helpful in the long term. Ideas and interests change as learning takes place, opportunities arise and disappear often with startling rapidity. The generation of young people currently in the classroom is faced with a future that is much more complex than that experienced by their grandparents or their parents. They are entering a global marketplace at a time of rapid technological change and significant economic uncertainty; their post-school education choices are likely to be costly in terms of tuition fees and loan repayments, and, on the plus side, opportunities are opening up in traditionally gender-segregated labour markets creating possibilities for both girls and boys who want to explore non-traditional occupations.

Over the period of their working lives, there is a high likelihood that individuals will seek (or be required) to

develop in changing occupations, to move into many (possibly different) jobs at different times in life, and to manage learning opportunities or requirements (at tertiary institutions, in the workplace) throughout life. In such a dynamic environment, when the jobs in which many young people will be employed don't yet exist, is it possible to talk about 'future-proofing'? Fortunately the answer is 'yes, at least to a certain extent'. Young people can be supported in crafting career pathways even within a context as uncertain and changeable as this.

Over the last four years, the Education Employment Linkages Research Group has been exploring the question: How can support systems in schools and elsewhere help young people to make good education-employment linkages that will have on-going benefits for them, as well as for their communities and New Zealand as a whole?

The four strands of the project cover research in school communities, in regional communities (for those who have left school with low or no qualifications), in Maori and Pasifika communities and through employer-led channels. Publications and research reports from previous stages of the project are available at the EEL website ([www.eel.org.nz](http://www.eel.org.nz)). The project is now entering its fifth and final year. Below we discuss some of the work arising from the first EEL strand, focusing on research that has relevance for subject teachers, such as teachers of English, in secondary schools.

## Career management competencies

The school-communities strand of the EEL project is focused on career education. This is because career education is one of the key supports for young people in transition from school to work and further education (including training). In this final phase of the project we are working with two schools to look at how "career management competencies" might work in practice. While career management competencies are suggested the Ministry of Education's 2009 Guidelines on Career Education and Guidance in Schools, few schools understand what might be involved in this.

Career management competencies have the potential to address some of problems that beset career education in many schools. These problems include:

- career education only reaching or engaging a minority of students (i.e. just the ones doing

Gateway and STAR courses, or just the ones who go to see the careers advisor),

- the low status of career education (and sometimes a lack of management support),
- a model of career education that does not address the needs of young people in the 21st century.

A key difficulty is that the career education framework remains as it was for the 20th century, mainly focused on delivering information about tertiary courses and the labour market and/or helping match students' aptitudes and abilities to these. Such activities may fill some important gaps in the short-term but really we need an altogether different career education framework to enable young people to successfully manage and engage with the dynamic context discussed above. Because the context for career education—occupations and labour market arrangements, skills and competencies required for work and life, people's aspirations—has changed, young people need a different framework for engaging with it, including long-term strategies and competencies for life.

Career management competencies are designed to meet this need by preparing young people not just with skills, but with knowledge, attitudes and values. So competencies are about knowing when, how, and why to mobilise skills (not just to "have" skills). Moreover they are designed for all students (not just the at-risk ones or the academic high achievers). And they involve all of the teachers in the school.

The Ministry of Education has defined three career management competencies:

- Developing Self-Awareness – about building and maintaining a positive self-concept; interacting positively and effectively with others; and changing and growing throughout life.
- Exploring Opportunities – about participating in lifelong learning to support life and work goals; locating information and using it effectively; and understanding the relationship between work, society and the economy.
- Deciding and Acting – about making life and career-enhancing decisions; making and reviewing learning and career plans; and acting appropriately to manage careers.

While the MOE guide suggests matching particular career management competencies to the key competencies they seem most closely related to, it might be most useful to think of each set of competencies as co-implicated. Two recent NZCER research studies of curriculum innovation and reading in relation to the key competencies have shown that, while teachers often look for a “natural” fit between particular competencies and particular learning areas, they later find themselves able to make many more links or that an entire set of competencies is engaged at once.

How then should all teachers be involved? And why should they be involved when there is already a designated careers advisor? Isn't this their job?

Firstly, competencies cannot be taught or learned directly in and of themselves. They instead require rich learning contexts which subject teachers can provide through subject areas that have engaging opportunities to learn.

Second, there are somewhat different learning outcomes for students, which subject teachers can foster. Developing competencies requires a critical approach to information and knowledge, helping students to know about learning and how they themselves best learn so students are capable of adapting their competencies for use in new situations. Classroom subject content (e.g. what is taught in English) and disciplinary knowledge (e.g. how to think and communicate in particular ways) are important. But now it's also important to augment these with dispositions. That is, learning to learn and coming to be in the world depend on learning something in depth such that the nature of knowledge (its fragility, how it came to be, how it functions) is also understood. So students still need to have a serious encounter with knowledge (e.g. in English class). It is through these encounters that they can develop dispositions such as a will to learn, a preparedness to explore, and a determination to keep going forward and so learn about themselves.

What careers advisors already do is a good start here. The students that do see the careers advisor receive useful guidance. However the careers advisor's other tasks are often based around work experience options and pre-packaged information. And often these things are left at that level—experience and information – something students (in other research) have reported struggling to make sense of or use well.

Other teachers in the school have a role to help students reframe those experiences and that information with learning-to-learn strategies and reflective practices. For subject teachers in classrooms, these strategies would involve giving students time to think and talk together about how they are learning. An English teacher might put up a poster about English-related careers in their classroom and this is a good start. However they might also engage students in authentic experiences of work in the areas indicated (including engaging with communities of practice) so that students make real meaning from the information in the poster. Instead of the sole possibility of sending students to the careers advisor for one-to-one guidance, English teachers might work alongside careers advisors to think about the needs of particular students and how they could be addressed through class activities. English teachers might also work together across learning areas to create rich learning contexts for students to build career management competencies.

The idea of career management competencies creates huge challenges for schools. It means rethinking many of the relationships, roles and responsibilities between subject teachers, curriculum leaders, and careers advisors or transition teams. It also means thinking strategically about the place and purposes of career education, and how teachers can take a lead from the school's existing work on competency development through the key competencies focus in the New Zealand Curriculum.

We are interested not only in if and how it could work, but what it really takes to make it work. We are also especially interested in any new learning, teaching and leadership opportunities that may arise from trying to help students develop career management competencies.

## **Future-proofing**

Future-proofing involves helping young people emerge from school 'fit' for a world in flux. Career education that focuses on the development of career management competencies— involving all teachers and all students—is an important resource for this. The 'what' of careers, such as deciding on particular occupational destinations, is less significant in this approach than the 'how' of helping young people to develop the capacity to successfully negotiate the interconnected worlds of learning and work. There are anxieties attendant on this approach: parents, in particular, may prefer the apparent security of a child

leaving school with a specific occupational destination in mind. The rapidly changing context discussed at the beginning of this article can make this a risky option, particularly when young people's self-awareness is also undergoing significant development. But not knowing how the future will unfold does not mean taking the opposite approach, either: that of assuming that no preparation is possible. In the latter half of last century many young people, particularly those who tended not to visit the careers advisor, left school and went 'job-shopping' with a well-developed sense of hope but little else in the way of direction. The result was frequently a mismatch in which the educational and work pathways they pursued failed to come together in something they 'really wanted to do'.

While the competencies approach does not deliver a particular destination in the way that traditional careers education seemed to, it has the potential to transform the experience of school-leavers for the better: a solid grounding in 'developing self-awareness', in 'exploring opportunities' and in 'deciding and acting', all needed for crafting career pathways, is a vital step towards a rewarding synthesis in which an individual's learning pathway and their engagement in the world of work can come together with who they are and who they want to be. So when a young person does choose to follow up on a particular pathway towards a career – either while they are at school or later – their decisions and actions will be meaningful, intelligent, and in keeping with their own values, interests and priorities.

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