Choosing a high school major – an important phase in the career development of Israeli adolescents

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Introduction

Adolescence is an important period for exploration and development in various areas. The high-school stage is the first stage in which adolescents are required to make significant, committed decisions, with long-term implications (Fouad et al., 2009; Gati & Saka, 2001). Decisions made at this period may have substantial impact on one’s life style and future academic and vocational possibilities later in life (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005). Despite the importance of this developmental stage for adolescents, and despite the wide recognition of the developmental nature of the academic and vocational decision-making process, the existing knowledge lacks adequate empirical studies focusing on high school adolescents’ academic decision-making (Fouad, 1995; Fouad et al., 2009). Furthermore, a precise understanding of the nature of this process and the outcomes emanating from it is also inadequate (Lent, Paixao, Silva & Leitao, 2010).

Based upon empirical studies that suggest the important role of self efficacy and outcome expectations in the career development process of the individual (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000, 2002), the current study focuses upon Israeli adolescents’ self-efficacy in selecting a high school major and their expectations regarding the possible effects of this decision.

Method

Participants: 680 Israeli Jewish adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 (M=16.1; SD=0.43), 46% of whom were female. All the participants were from central area of Israel and grown in middle SES families.


Procedure: After obtaining the required approvals, research questionnaires were distributed in the participants’ schools during the month preceding the date on which they needed to decide their major. Each student who agreed to participate in the study completed the forms independently, anonymously, with up to an hour allotted for this task. No incentives were provided to the participants.

Results

Findings suggest that during the month before choosing a major, while most adolescents (52.5%) are confident about their current academic plans, few (17.8%) are confident about their future academic and vocational plans. Adolescents’ awareness of their personal competences and interests (“self knowledge”) is a significant component in establishing their beliefs in their ability to select a major. Higher self-efficacy beliefs reinforced the degree of crystallization of academic decisions, present and future, and strengthened the participants’ belief in the probability of achieving the desired outcomes.

Discussion

These results demonstrate the suitability of SCCT to understanding the high school stage and reinforce the validity of the adapted self-efficacy and expected outcomes instruments.

the transition to high school and selecting a major stage is an important initial developmental stage with unique characteristics. The decision-making skill ripens at this stage of development, and crystallizing preferences and self-knowledge are important components in establishing it. These components should be emphasized in interventions aiming to assist adolescents in the decision-making process.

There is great importance in examining the factors associated with the development of the decision-making process and its effect on the development of decision-making capacity beliefs starting from this stage.