Meaning Ascribed to Career Development Activities by Recent High School

Graduates: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

In the last decade, Colorado has increased its efforts and requirements around postsecondary and workforce readiness through the implementation of Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAP) in high schools (CDE, 2009; CDE, 2014; CDE, 2020). Although based on career development research, no studies have inquired as to the meaning students make through ICAP. Eight Colorado high school graduates were interviewed to examine the meaning students ascribe to their high school career development. The qualitative study identified four categories in which students assign meaning: Experiential Activities, Professional Skills, Significant Relationships, and Relevance. The article provides application recommendations for school counselors.

Meaning Ascribed to Career Development Activities by Recent High School Graduates: A Phenomenological Study

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has long included career development as a domain in its model, and research has demonstrated its important role in a student's overall success (ASCA, 2017). The federal Every Student Success Act (ESSA) of 2015 recognized the need to help young people develop college and career readiness skills (ESG, 2019). Since that time, nearly every state has developed legislation and standards toward this effort (US Department of Education, n.d.). A systematic review of the literature found that gaps in student understanding of university information, financial aid, and limitations of guidance have hindered social mobility for students with socio-economic and academic barriers (Mocca, et al., 2019).

Colorado passed legislation in 2009 requiring all high school students to develop a multi-year Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP), and in 2010, the state board of education developed ICAP rules (CDE, 2020). While the ICAP movement gained momentum as schools were required to implement the process, ICAP practitioners were asking the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) for more guidance (CDE, 2014). Thus, CDE released "High School ICAP Quality Indicators" in the areas of Self-Awareness, Career Awareness, Postsecondary Aspirations, Postsecondary Options, Environmental Expectations, Academic Planning, Employability skills, and Personal Financial Literacy with a focus on Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) (CDE, 2014; CDE, 2020).

Colorado has since documented positive increases in postsecondary attendance (District at a Glance, n.d.); however, there are no indications of what elements most

influence student career development and their pursuit of postsecondary education. Additionally, CDE has posted promising practices resources on its website; however, practices are not corroborated beyond anecdotal data.

In 2018, CDE released new graduation guidelines for 2021 graduates requiring students to score proficient on nationally normed tests (ex. SAT/ACT) or complete a capstone project that demonstrates PWR. Educators again sought support in how to make capstone and ICAP processes engaging, meaningful, and relevant. In 2020, the ICAP Playbook was released by CDE to provide school districts with practical resources and support for the implementation of career development aligned to the ICAP Quality Indicators with a greater focus on developing post-secondary and workforce readiness skills--entrepreneurial, personal, civic/interpersonal, and professional (CDE, 2020).

The American Association for Career and Technical Education cites standards as a component of highly effective career development. However, a study by the New Skills for Youth Initiative (2018) in which CTE Directors, select school counselors, and state Counseling Directors for all 50 states were surveyed found that only 58% indicate they believe they are at least somewhat effective in this work. There is very little research related to outcomes for state-level standards and initiatives. One such research found school counselors had been tasked with determining effective ICAP components, but most felt inadequate to do so, and more research was needed to inform practice (Moeder-Chandler, 2017). The authors also did not find research in the literature about effectiveness from the student perspective.

Literature Review

Research has suggested that the greatest barriers to social mobility and students transition to higher education are related to a lack of understanding around the application process and financial aid, socio-economic barriers, and a student's social background (i.e. being first generation or a racial/ethnic minority) (Mocca, et al., 2019). In order to support students to career and/or higher education, Colorado utilizes the ICAP Quality Indicators to focus school counselors' and educators' work within career planning (CDE, 2014; CDE, 2020). These eight areas are described through research.

Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness is defined by CDE (2014) as: "Understand how one's unique interests, talents, and aspirations play a role in decision-making and interpersonal relationships and how individual thoughts and feelings get students excited about life and learning." (p. 15). Nyamwange (2016) found that first-year college students were drawn to careers that were authentic to their personalities and traits in the pursuit of leading "rewarding lives" (p. 99). There appears to be a relationship between understanding individual weaknesses and strengths and the ability to make career and employment decisions (Redden, 2015). Dhillon and Kaur (2005) also reported a significant relationship between the factors of career maturity, self-concept, achievement motivation, and locus of control.

Career Awareness

Career Awareness is an understanding of different careers and jobs and the pathways to reach those opportunities, as well as a consideration of the economic, cultural, and gender influences on career choice (CDE, 2014). Factors impacting the

strength of student's career choices include gender specifically related to gender-stereotyped careers - girls being more interested in working with people and boys being more interested in careers that included data (Tang, et al., 2008; Falco & Summers, 2019). Additionally, research indicates that having an understanding of what a career involves is significant in creating interest in that career (Nyamwange, 2016). Service-learning has also shown promise in supporting a student's awareness of career decision-making and increased knowledge of careers (Coulter-Kern et al., 2013).

Postsecondary Aspirations

CDE (2014) defined Postsecondary Aspirations as exploration in career activities related to the interests, passions, goals, and perceived options. Through a systematic literature review, Akosah-Twumasi, et al. (2018) assert that interest in a career, reported across cultures, makes a difference in youth career decision making. Allen and Bradley (2014) found that participation in their career counseling intervention boosts a subject's confidence in their career choice aligned to their interests and skills. Internships or job shadow experiences in fields of interest have been highly correlated to confirmation of career fit (Rothman & Sisman, 2016; Papadimitriou, 2014; Roth et al., 2009).

Postsecondary Options

This Quality Indicator is defined by CDE (2014) to "Be aware of and participate in a variety of postsecondary and career opportunities. Use tools such as career clusters, personality assessments, and learning style inventories to highlight individual strengths and capabilities." (p. 15). Gifted high school students participating in STEM curriculum felt the majority of their understanding of careers came from teachers (Mullet, et al.,

2018). King (2012) noted that college visits and college admission test prep were highly connected to college attendance in rural, underrepresented students.

Environmental Expectations

The exploration of environmental expectations involves assessing how culture, family, community, school, and the world impact career and post-secondary educational plans (CDE, 2014). Alexander and Dlamini (2012) reported siblings influence each other's career trajectory both positively and negatively through feelings of responsibility and pressure to become independent as potential motivating factors in academic pursuits that lead to post-secondary education. Austin (2010) indicated both family and school are influencers on career decision making, and the "presence of environmental support" (p. 129) molded academic and career aspirations. Similarly, Haddad and Marx (2018) found encouraging teachers and involved parents impact how students perceive their success. Mullett, et al. (2018) wrote, "students describe feeling empowered by high expectations" (p. 83). Teachers that demanded more appear to get more from students.

Academic Planning

Academic Planning involves ensuring that students take and pass the courses required for postsecondary goals (CDE, 2014). Academic schedules should not be focused solely on requirements for high school graduation. Gifted students studying the STEM field felt their school counselors were only available to create and change their schedule and did not feel they were available for career counseling purposes (Mullet, et al., 2018). However, it was also discovered that for females, "learning experiences have a greater influence on the development of career self-efficacy" (Tang, et al. 2008). As female students are allowed opportunities to explore careers, their decision to pursue

those careers increase. Additionally, in regards to learning, Shin (2018) found that projects "related to the students' experience, purpose of learning, and real life" (p. 108) increased student motivation to learn and improve their attitudes towards learning.

Employability Skills

Employability Skills is about teaching skills required for obtaining and maintaining employment (CDE, 2014). Brown (2016) asserted career counseling must include learning about employability skills, the job search and market, and how to obtain job placement. It is suggested that integrating career training and projects in the classroom increases students' attainment of skills necessary for careers (Shuptrine, 2013).

Personal Financial Literacy

Applying personal financial needs and financial aid topics and vocabulary to career and academic planning is also included in the Quality Indicators (CDE, 2014). According to Akosah-Twumasi, et al. (2018), income was the highest-ranked important consideration among youth when considering careers, and "prestige" was sought within a career in order to "live good lives" (p. 5). Given high debt rates, consumer and academic financial literacy seems to be an important factor in helping young people develop PWR. Research about best practices for financial literacy suggests that it must be relevant to the student, not be a one-shot infusion, and be developmentally appropriate (Kasman et al., 2018; Totenhagen et al., 2014).

Career Development

High schools often create career development programs to impact academics positively through the connection to future aspirations. Schaeffer and Rivera (2014) found that creating a career development program embedded within the school culture

was instrumental in "expanding their (student) sense of possibilities related to careers" and "students were becoming more goal-oriented and thoughtful about their goals" (p. 61). Martinez (2015) suggested that career development with 9th-graders increased their confidence in choosing a career pathway, and students related the connection of their career pathway to their academics as a motivating factor to do well in school.

The importance of career advising and development in schools has become elevated across the nation in recent years, with a specific focus on leveraging highly effective practices to help young people develop post-secondary and workforce readiness (New Skills for Youth, et al., 2018). Economic conditions necessitate youth are post-secondary and workforce ready. A report by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University finds that 68% of jobs in the U.S. in 2025 will require post-secondary education (Almond & Hyslop, 2019). Thus, it is imperative that the elements that produce positive outcomes are investigated, particularly from the perspective of those who are being served by the programming.

Purpose of the Study

Many factors may impact career meaning-making, including how an individual makes sense of those factors (Alexander & Dlamini, 2012). This research seeks to understand student meaning-making of their high school career development experiences in order to support effective programming. Findings from this study will inform educators of the student's perspective of their career development.

Edmund Husserl first used phenomenology to understand "human consciousness itself" (Hanna, et al., 2017, p. 144), and in current phenomenological practices, researchers interview individuals to understand their lived experiences

through common themes to determine similarities of experience (Hanna, et al., 2017). Through transcendental phenomenology processes, this research endeavors to discover from the student's perspective: What meaning students in post-secondary education ascribe to their high school career development experiences?

Method

Transcendental phenomenology was chosen for the method's systematic way of collecting participant perspectives through their own understanding and discovering the essence of a person's experience. In an effort to gain a breadth of knowledge around participants' experiences, the researcher utilizes open-ended questioning (Henriquez, 2014). To limit researcher bias, as directed by Colaizzi (1978), researchers explored their epoche or relationships with career development. Both researchers work as high school ICAP implementers and have interest in understanding what is most impactful. For the purposes of this study, career development experiences are defined as any activity intended to promote self-reflection and career and post-secondary planning.

Data Collection Procedures

Four questions guided the interviews and allowed participants to expand within their own experiences in search of an answer to the main research question: What meaning do students in post-secondary education ascribe to their high school career development experiences? Interviewers asked: Tell me about your career development experience in high school. What activities that were focused on career development did you find helpful? What activities that were focused on career development were not helpful? How did your career development in high school inform your post-secondary choice? Eight interviews were conducted, four interviews per researcher, with an

average interview lasting 45 minutes. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked to clarify their statements to support the interviewer's best understanding.

Participants

A pre-qualification survey was first sent to Colorado adults through college and high school email alumnae databases. Social media posts on high school and college sites also solicited participants. To qualify, participants were required to be between the ages of 18-25 and a Colorado high school graduate. Eighty-nine people who took the survey qualified for participation. The researchers then selected participants based on a desire for a wide geographic representation of Colorado, including rural and urban areas, varying genders and ethnicities. Of the eight who participated, five were from urban and three from rural areas. Five identified as female, and three as male. Four identified as white, one Asian/Pacific Islander, and three Hispanic/Latino. In addition, all participants selected indicated a three or above on a five-point rating question for career choice self-efficacy. Of the participants, two indicated a 5 on this scale, five rated themselves as 4, and one as a 3. Participants selected for interviews were emailed to confirm a date and time for the interview and asked to complete the consent form. The eight who opted to be interviewed were assigned a participant number, and all data collection corresponded to these numbers. Eight interviews were deemed sufficient as themes began to repeat and saturation appeared met.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed through zoom software. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological procedure to data analysis was followed in order to code and understand results. Initially, the entire interview transcript is read to get an overall sense

of the interview and data. Next significant statements are identified, highlighted, and transferred into a spreadsheet for further analysis. Once all significant statements were identified, statements were coded for meaning. This process mimics the structural coding technique described by Saldana (2016) and puts each statement into a textural and structural context. The process is repeated through each significant statement, and from the textural and structural codes, each statement is given a unit of significance. For example: "I think the internship program especially helped with like learning how to apply for a job and find a job and do all that and then actually getting internships that I did or did not like um helped me decide" (participant 1) was coded texturally as "life skills" and structurally as "in school and career site" setting. The unit of significance was defined as "internship." The codes were then organized into clusters of themes and "integrated into an *exhaustive description*" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 61). At this point, axial coding methods were utilized to bring data together as a collective whole. Researchers defined four themes of student meaning-making within high school career development: experiential activities, professional skills, significant relationships, and relevance.

For data validation purposes, the researchers shared meaning statements with participants through a survey for member checking. The survey included four questions: Are the quotes you recognize as your own an accurate representation of the information you provided? Do the results (quotes, key themes, narratives) match your experiences? Do you want to change anything? Do you feel there are any key themes that are left out? Do you want to add anything? Eight of eight participants agreed their statements were accurate. Seven of the eight participants agreed that the results

matched their personal experience. The eighth made a suggestion for deletion, and two added confirmation comments.

Results

Data supported the recommendations from the state to create strong career development programs within high school, suggesting that programs that incorporate the ICAP Quality Indicators provide students with opportunities to make meaning and growth within the area of career development. As shown in Table 1, statements are organized into four themes: Experiential Career/College Awareness Activities, Professional Skills, Significant Relationships, and Relevance.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the four major themes presented in Table 1. The student is at the center, and the learnings of experiential activities and professional skills happen within the context of significant relationships and relevant experiences. The meanings of learning experiences are enhanced when students apply connection to self. Significant relationships play an important role in personalizing and individualizing experiences.

Experiential Career/College Awareness Activities

Findings show students created meaning in experiential career and college awareness through projects, college classes, volunteering, and internships/job shadow experiences. Outside of the classroom, students gain awareness of self, post-secondary opportunities, and career pathways, which boost their confidence in their abilities and develop career/academic self-efficacy. Within classrooms, students participate in surveys, career/college research, and self-reflections to develop a personal post-secondary career plan. Larger events and career/college field trips helped students to

explore options within careers and across colleges. Of the eight participants, seven reported taking college classes in high school as impacting their career/college development. Five of the eight participants mentioned participating in an internship or job shadow experience. Five of eight attributed their learning or understanding to the completion of surveys, and three of eight mentioned the opportunity to complete a personalized project. Students remembered varying experiences that included the opportunity for exploration, skill-building, and self-awareness. Experiential activities are further explained by three sub-categories: learning and skill-building through classes, projects, 1-1 tasks, and life skills; exploration through opportunities, events, and programs; self-efficacy and awareness activities.

Learning and Skill-Building Through Classes, Projects, 1-1 Tasks, and Life Skills.

The first sub-theme aligns to the ICAP Quality Indicators of Postsecondary Options and Academic Planning through the options of college and AP courses, personalized projects, and academic classes that are focused specifically on post-secondary planning. Participant 5 shared, "In high school I know I feel like having a senior seminar and kind of giving us an idea of what is next was really helpful….rather than just like being blinded after we graduated." College courses were mentioned as an area that helped students be prepared for their college track. "If I hadn't taken like the college pre-calc and like kind of gone the extra like college steps, early on, I would have been behind" (Participant 3). Taking college math or a higher level math AP course was discussed by three participants as making a difference within their college progress. One participant suggested more help was needed in learning how to study. They mentioned not feeling prepared or having the study skills for college courses.

Projects also created opportunities for students to learn about their careers and interests. Participant 3 shared:

I tried like designing a medieval-style building and that was the first building I really tried designing and I think that's what, it really showed me, to like, I wanted to do architecture. So I thought it was really cool tangible.

Additional learning took place within internships. Participant 1 shared, "The internship program especially helped with like learning how to apply for a job and find a job and do all that and then actually getting internships that I did or did not like um helped me decide."

Students' discussion of their learning helps us understand that personalized projects, and courses related to their post-secondary track should be focused on when creating student schedules and providing opportunities within class assignments.

Exploration Through Opportunities, Events, and Programs

The second sub-theme of exploration connects to the career awareness ICAP Quality Indicator that recommends high school students attain and understand different career options and pathways (CDE, 2019). Exploration took place within school, during extra-curriculars, on college tours, and within internship opportunities. Four of eight participants mentioned wanting or having 1-1 meetings with counselors to understand the different options to explore. This suggests that personalized activities and opportunities create deeper meaning for students.

Internships were mentioned as a way to "level the playing field" for low-income students. Often students from low-income schools and families do not have the same access to networking opportunities and resources. By providing these exploration

activities in school, students are able to identify options for their future. Extra-curriculars also helped students identify interest areas. Participant 1 shared:

I think I started doing like all kinds of activities because I was told like it would look good on my resume, and then once I started doing them, I started really enjoying them, and then I just started doing like all kinds of different directions so that I could find what I did like cuz like I started a lot of sports and quit them because I hated them. I started doing clubs and like pursued some a lot more strongly than others, and it helped me figure out what I was passionate about.

The opportunities schools provided to connect students to careers and colleges helped define student's personal interests. Students could explore, ask questions, and get personalized advice in their career and college planning.

Self-Efficacy and Awareness

The third sub-theme includes activities, surveys, and reflection to develop self-efficacy and awareness and promotes that students should be able to identify and understand their personal abilities as they relate to their interests, understand how they learn best, and demonstrate maturity within relationships (CDE, 2019). Within each interview, participants discussed activities that were personalized to them and allowed them to learn about themselves and help them further clarify their interests and passions. Within the sub-category, five of the eight participants shared significant statements that college classes contributed to gained self-awareness and built career self-efficacy. Four mentioned surveys; three attributed increased self-awareness because of interest-based surveys; two felt supported through skill-based tests, and one participant identified with a learning style survey that helped them understand how best

to be successful. It appears support of their interest through an assessment helped hone in on different pathways. Participant 4 shared, "I think for me I had always been interested in how things work and things like that. So having a [high] science or math score. That was good. I think it kind of helps reinforce that."

Alternatively, the participants shared that when they got scores or labels they did not find to be true, it prompted questioning of self. Participant 5 articulated, "Everything that the surveys would tell me. I was like, well, I don't really see myself doing that. But maybe that's what I should do because it's what it's telling me, if that makes sense." It is important here that school counselors help students understand their results and how different skills or interests could indicate a number of different careers.

Ultimately, school counselors and personnel have potential to impact a student's pathway. Participant 7 shared an experience of wanting to drop their ceramics class, but their school counselor asked them to stay in the class for one more week. It turned into their favorite class, and they learned their preference for working with their hands.

Experiential activities, either large scale like a project or participating in college classes or internships, or on a smaller scale with a classroom lesson using an interest or learning survey appears to promote student self-awareness and build student self-efficacy, which in turn supported their career development. It also appeared that experiential activities had a greater impact when school counselors were able to work with students individually, or the project was aligned to the students interest. In Figure 1, experiential activities borders the student indicating the learning through these activities helped students to self-explore and built career confidence.

Professional Skills

The second broad theme participant statements fell under encompassed professional skills, which developed through school assignments and collaboration with school counselors and volunteers. Students engage in written and verbal communication, presentation skills, and financial literacy. Students access resources to understand further where knowledge can be found and use that knowledge to make informed choices around post-secondary options. Professional skills acquired help students develop self-advocacy, self-regulation, confidence, perseverance, and other life skills. This includes basic job application requirements - resume, cover letter, and interviewing skills. Professional skills are further defined by three subcategories: Communication, resource knowledge, and skill-building.

Communication

Communication skills, the first subcategory, included practicing interviews and giving presentations were noted as supporting students' career development. Participant 3 shared that: "I know I struggled most with the presenting aspect and being able to present myself effectively, and I think that helped me kind of gain the confidence and idea of how to effectively do it." Participant 2 shared about the value of mock interviews:

> That experience having like three or four people there to like critique me and be like, hey, so you might want to talk more about this personal experience and make yourself relatable, because I have definitely not gotten jobs because I was not relatable enough.

Communication links best to the ICAP Quality Indicator Self-Awareness, which

asserts students should share their experiences through both written and verbal means (CDE, 2019). Participant 6 mentioned creating connections over the phone and the ability to communicate needs while seeking support is another professional skill developed while in high school.

Resource Knowledge

The second subcategory, resource knowledge, included learning about financial literacy and scholarships. ICAP Quality Indicators include Personal Financial Literacy, which promotes the understanding of post-secondary costs and budget awareness (CDE, 2019). One participant mentioned not liking the financial literacy lessons that did not seem to relate to their life - a life budget exercise; however, that same participant mentioned lessons around FAFSA and scholarships to be extremely helpful. The interview discussion highlighted that financial literacy did not seem relevant to the participants' lives at the time, but understanding how to pay for college was highly relevant and so helpful. In member checking, a second participant mentioned wanting more financial literacy within high school, feeling that their life now would feel more informed. It seems with resource knowledge, helping students know where to find accurate information, and making that information relatable to high school students, appear to be factors to consider.

Skill-Building

Skill-building, as the third subcategory, is connected to the ICAP Quality Indicator Employability Skills, which encourages students to understand career systems, acquire personal qualities employers seek, and grow in math and writing (CDE, 2019). Five of the eight participants named resume and cover letter writing skills that they developed

in high school as helpful to their employability. Additionally, the support students had to complete college and job applications were mentioned as helpful. In reference to resumes, participant 1 shared, "I got my current job doing that, like taking a template from high school and just rewording it to make it fit my experience now."

Personal qualities of perseverance fit in skill-building. Participant 5 mentioned having to work through life on their own after high school, without family and without their school counselor. They initially went to college and became overwhelmed by the workload, switched majors, and then left college altogether. It was their own pep-talk of "get it together" that helped them return to the career path they initially started after high school with a greater belief in themselves and their interests. In Figure 1, the theme professional skills completes the circle around the student due to the personal attainment of career competencies.

Significant Relationships

The third theme that emerged was about significant relationships in the lives of the students. These significant relationships influenced student development and pursuit of post-secondary goals, as well as self-efficacy and self-concept. Comments about relationship impact were mentioned 64 times in the eight interviews. Significant relationships characterized by authentic connections, trust, belief and encouragement allowed students to reach future career and educational goals. These relationships were with family, school counselors, teachers, coaches, and other school staff. Subcategories included: connection and trust; support, encouragement, and belief in; influence and initiative.

Connection & Trust

Subcategory connection and trust highlighted the importance of a significant person in student lives. Participant 1 described these relationships as, "just weird and (laughs) in the sense that, like I don't know, we're all just like a big family. It's like we're all learning from each other, and we all trust each other." Additionally, students believed they were cared for as a person which connected to how much they integrated feedback. Participant 1 said, "...why would I care what somebody is saying if they don't care about me as a person." The adults in these relationships held high expectations for the youth, helped them learn about themselves, and exposed them to expanded options. Similarly, participant 7 shared a story about a difficult math teacher. After completing pre-calculus in their junior year, the teacher recommended the student take their AP calculus class. Participant 7 realized, "...we built a really good connection and it got to the point where, like, you know, I used to love going to math." The ability to create belonging appears to impact students' connection to school through relationships.

Support, Encouragement, and Belief in

The second subcategory was demonstrated through completion of everyday tasks, walking through unfamiliar activities, teaching life skills, and providing career exposure. Participant 8 shared about their school counselor, "Her listening definitely gave me help...She gave me tons of resources and was willing to sit down and talk to me." Participant 5 said, "[she] would sit with us and like tell us how to do things, step by step, that was really helpful because, like, for example, my parents don't speak English. So they had, like, no idea what I was doing." It seemed important to have someone

available for students to help with unknown processes. Sitting through each step demonstrated to students the care and belief they had in that student's ability to be successful.

Encouragement occurred through long-term planning, motivation toward goals, and inspired a belief in self. Many talked about finding personal passions through the encouragement of a teacher. Participant 4 shared about a teacher who encouraged them to explore STEM through clubs and activities. That participant is now majoring in engineering. Participant 7 had a similar experience:

> You know, through all those things my teacher, Mr. Salas (name changed), he used to tell me that he could see me being like a engineer or going to School of Mines because he just said I was so good at math. He studied mathematics. But anyways, um, so that's what really got me interested in that type of career field.

> When asked if they had previously envisioned going to college or into a math

career field, participant 7 said, "NO!" Many talked about how this support allowed them to believe in their ability to navigate college successfully.

Family relationships also inspired action. When asked about what prompted the decision to move away to college, Participant 5's older brother told them, "I want you to get out of the valley. I want you to move here and start school. So he's the one that was like, you need to come here." Over and over, participants relayed that adult encouragement made a difference in their next steps.

Influence and Initiative

Influence and initiative, as a third subcategory, documented how these significant relationships encouraged students to change personal life circumstances, emulate role

models, and develop personal interests, skills, and strengths. When speaking of her decision to go to college, participant 2 said, "I remember him (teacher) being very supportive of me going to Washington. And that was really good, because I think especially in that time I needed somebody to tell me that I wasn't making a crazy decision." These relationships were role models and helped participants see a vision for their own path and make plans toward that path.

School staff developed relationships by demonstrating genuine interest and care in the student, and by students taking initiative to cultivate these relationships in order to reach goals. Participant 7 illustrated this when talking about meeting his school counselor, "I literally just went in there, like introduced myself. And I said, I look forward to working with you next year." Participant 7 continued to say that the relationship with his counselor, as well as family, influenced his decision to create personal change. "I was just tired of seeing like all the bad habits that my family had, and like just people in general around me, and I just didn't want that life for myself, for my younger brother, my younger family." These relationships had lasting impact, and many continued to support participants beyond graduation. Participant 3 said, "Ann (name changed) had a ton of impacts. Like she was helping me from sophomore year, when I was in her advisory all the way, but she still helps me. We talk every now and then." In Figure 1, significant relationships surround the student, experiential activities, and professional relationships due to the importance students attributed to these connections.

Relevance

The final theme that data revealed was relevance, which in Figure 1 encircles the student, experiential activities, professional skills, and significant relationships indicating

the association of personalization on positive student perception of career experiences. Students identified that when projects, classes, and activities related to what they were currently doing or needed, students felt more engaged. Alternatively, a participant shared that if the information was not currently relevant, they did not retain or pay attention to the information.

> "In high school, I couldn't apply for a credit card, so maybe in my head, I was like why do I need this...I was like, "why do we care" but now as like a young adult it's like I should have cared" (Participant 1).

Personalization and individualization of activities were pervasive in each previous theme. Students remember learning more about themselves within inventories and projects. They remember the people who made a personal connection and pushed them to achieve their goals, and participants remembered learning practical skills that would help them in their next steps. Relevance as a fourth theme impacted each participant's connection to opportunities and activities. Participant statements within each category highlighted that meaning was enhanced by the level of customization to the individual student. In fact, participant three shared, "Maybe just explaining like how it will impact you in the future and being able to focus on it early on with like benefits, benefits everyone." The hindsight of our participants indicated that continually connecting the activities with a future purpose would have helped them connect more deeply with the material and how it would impact their future.

Discussion

The career development movement in the United States, and concurrent ICAP development in Colorado, has been borne out of a need to address economic

disparities. Just as is true in the majority of states, most jobs in Colorado require post-secondary education, and these jobs require skills to meet the ever-increasing demands of the workforce (CDE, 2014). In the ICAP Toolkit, CDE reports that a "meaningful" ICAP is expected to increase academic engagement, develop student self-efficacy, connect high school learning to post-secondary education and to career, help students select and develop a career pathway, and develop transferable skills to work, academics, and life (CDE, 2014). This research supports The ICAP Quality Indicators from a student perspective. Students interviewed reported awareness about their pathway and understood how to find resources. Participants reported recognizing that the activities and opportunities they had in high school contributed to where they currently were. The data indicated that career development programs helped students gain a greater sense of self and determine what pathway to pursue.

Research suggests that school counselors play a pivotal role in high school students' college and career preparation (Paolini, 2019; Gilfillan, 2018; Hines et al., 2011). These studies are generally from the perspective of the school counselor or the needs of the workforce; however, there is a dearth of research about how students assign meaning to ICAP. This phenomenological study explored the meaning derived from high school career development from the perspective of the student.

The purpose of this research was to augment the body of knowledge about how components of career development influence the attitudes, beliefs, and choices of students as it relates to their career. With a research question of, "What meaning do students in post-secondary education ascribe to their high school career development experiences?", the lived experiences of eight Colorado high school graduates who were

attending or had finished college were captured through electronic video interviews. From the participants' words, four themes emerged-- Experiential Activities, Professional Skills, Significant Relationships, and Relevance.

First, when students were actively engaged in experiential activities aligned to their individual strengths, interests, or skills, the meaning of the experience was enhanced. These experiences included interactive classroom activities and surveys, internships, job shadows, career and college fairs, career site tours, and college visits. Most of these activities included some type of self-reflection and application to self. Students reported learning more about their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and skills (Quality Indicator: Self Awareness), about career (Quality Indicators: Career Awareness, Post-Secondary Options), and developing future goals based on these experiences (Quality Indicator: Post-Secondary Aspirations).

Secondly, participants appreciated practical learning of professional skills, including resume building and interviews (Quality Indicator: Employability Skills), collaboration and team-building, project-based learning, presentations, and fiscal literacy (Quality Indicator: Personal Financial Literacy). Students reported learning communication skills, self-advocacy, confidence, discipline, and perseverance.

Third, all students spoke of the importance of significant relationships as they developed their post-secondary career path. Most students spoke of a relationship with a school counselor, but other relationships included teachers, coaches, and family. School counselors and teachers exposed students to career options (Quality Indicator: Post-secondary Options), helped students identify personal strengths and interests (Quality Indicator: Self-Awareness), and helped students develop a career path through

their academic courses (Quality Indicator: Academic Planning). Family helped students develop personal expectations in context of their culture and worldview (Quality Indicator: Environmental Expectations). These relationships influenced students' career goals and also helped students develop a sense of self-efficacy and a belief in their ability to reach post-secondary goals (Quality Indicator: Post-Secondary Aspirations).

A fourth construct emerged that augmented the meaning of the previously described themes--a sense of individualization or personalization, or that the material was relatable to the student. All students spoke of the value of having the experiences relate to who they were, their specific circumstances, needs, and culture, and of relationships that cared about these things. When students felt like the experiences connected to them personally, they felt they mattered and that they could apply the learning. Interestingly though, many also reported not understanding this while they were in high school, but later beyond high school. Participant 1 said, "...maybe in my head I was like why do I need this, which does, yeah, describe my experience. I was like 'why do we care,' but now as like a young adult, it's like I should have cared."

Implications

The four themes of experiential activities, professional skills, significant relationships, and relevance endured beyond high school graduation. When schools develop career development programs, it is important to consider how activities related to the Quality Indicators can be designed for the individual student, emphasize experiences that are interactive, be based on relevant "real world" applications, and develop practical skills. School counselors are integral to this process, but it is recommended that career development be a systemic approach pervasive in the school

structure that engages students in meaningful relationships with a variety of school staff that also integrates family into the process.

Further research is needed to illuminate specific strategies that produce positive outcomes in student career self-efficacy. Additionally, a replication of this study outside of Colorado would aid in generalizability for student meaning making in career development programming.

Limitations

One potential limitation of this research is that both researchers are school counselors in Colorado and implement ICAP. Possible participant pressure to "answer correctly" may have impacted participant responses. In addition, this research happened at the onset of COVID-19. The call for participants was released the same week of the initial quarantine. Many post-secondary schools across the state who had previously agreed chose to deny the recruitment request over concerns of overloading email. While 89 people did respond and qualify for an interview, there might have been a wider range of students had the request gone out to more schools. While rich information was extracted, these interviews may not represent the experience of all youth across Colorado or the United States.

Conclusion

Students assigned positive meaning to high school career development activities that included experiential opportunities for learning and professional skills development contingent upon the influence and support of a mentor and their perception of personal relevance. High School career development programs should intentionally promote

positive relationships, real world experiences, and purposeful skill development with an emphasis on the individual student.

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Table 1

Details categories, sub categories, quotes and description of career development areas

Theme/Concept	Definition of Theme	Sub Categories
Experiential Career/College Awareness Activities	Engage students within and outside of the classroom to develop career/academic self-efficacy.	Knowledge acquisition & skill-building Exploration opportunities & events Self-efficacy & awareness activities
Professional Skills	Students develop self-advocacy, self-regulation, confidence, perseverance, employability and basic life skills.	Communication Resource knowledge Self-awareness Skill-building
Significant Relationship	Characterized by authentic connections, trust, belief, and encouragement support the student to reach future career and educational goals.	Connection and Trust Belief in/ Encouragement/Support Influence and Initiative
Relevance	Students engaged when they found information important to their current situation	Personalization/ Individualization

Figure 1

Themes in Context

Biographical Statements

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