The Transition from School to Work:

A Developmental Perspective

Mark L. Savickas

Behavioral Sciences Department

Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

Rootstown, OH 44272-0095

Abstract

Career development theory provides a comprehensive model for conceptualizing the

school-to-work transition. Starting in the 1920s, this model has guided the design of a plethora

of career education methods and materials that orient, teach, coach, and rehearse students for the

process of transiting from school to work. Essentially the developmental model, methods, and

materials aim to increase students' awareness of the choices to be made and information and

planning that bears on these choices.

A Developmental Perspective on the Transition from School to Work

The editors of this collection of articles asked the authors to focus on "explicitly applying their theories to the school-to-work transition of work-bound youth" and to "emphasize ways that their respective theoretical positions can be used to help understand or facilitate the STW transition of youth." This is an amiable assignment for advocates of career development theory because this evolutionary perspective on careers explicitly concentrates on the developmental tasks and individual coping resources required to successfully negotiate the predictable transitions that characterize the natural history of work lives. Of course, the transition of youth from school to work looms large in the landscape of predictable passages in a career because it marks the beginning of full-time employment.

The first half of this article discusses the developmental model for understanding the STW transition. The second half of this article describes methods and materials for facilitating the STW transition.

Understanding the STW Transition

The years following school leaving are years of choice and change. The choosing may be explicit or implicit, by action or inaction, but either way young adults make important career choices that change their lives. Numerous studies over the last 60 years have examined the experiences of youth in making the STW transition. These studies agree on one major conclusion, the essence of the developmental perspective on the STW transition: youth cope better with the STW transition if, as high school students, they developed **awareness of the choices to be made and information and planning that bears on these choices**. In the vernacular, high school students who "look ahead" and "look around" develop greater job-

seeking readiness (Stevens, 1973) and adjust more quickly to the work world. The original
studies that first stated this conclusion were conducted in the years between the Great Depression
and World War II. Although conducted in a different cultural context and historical epoch, these
landmark studies articulate a wisdom that remains informative today.   Particularly important
among empirical studies of this type are those that used a prospective, longitudinal research
design such as the Regents of New York inquiry entitled When Youth Leave School (Eckert &
Marshall, 1939); the American Youth Commission survey entitled Youth Tell Their Story (Bell,
1938); two Harvard studies on Scholastic, Economic and Social Background of Unemployed
Youth (Dearborn & Rothney, 1938) and "Advice from Apprentices" (Moyer, 1940); the National
Association of Secondary School Principals' study of Occupational Adjustment and the School
(Landy, 1940); and "From School to Work During the Depression Years" (Super & Wright,
1941a & 1941b). Each of these longitudinal studies examined the dynamics of the STW
transition by relating data collected from high school students to detailed information about their
subsequent adaptation to the world of work.

    Reading these studies today, one cannot help but be impressed by their resemblance to
contemporary research on the same topic. Take as an example the Landy (1940) study which
investigated ways of behaving in high school as predictors of occupational adjustment. He
identified "practices which seem useful" in preparing students for the STW transition. He urged
principals to establish courses that allow students to become responsible and self-directed in
situations that are as much like real jobs as possible. He implored teachers to make their students
aware of the problems involved in the STW. Landy based this advice on empirical results that
showed his Ways of Behaving Scale predicted occupational adjustment, especially items that
indicated whether students had considered the place of work in their lives, explored occupations,
and considered the match between preferred occupations and their own abilities and interests.

Other items in the set of 26 address issues such as seeking advice from sound sources, using past experiences in making decisions, and investigating training opportunities and working conditions.   In terms of counseling practices concerning the STW transition, Truman Kelley (1928, 1940) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education suggested that counselors need to assess students' "probable success" in making the STW transition using a construct called "Index of Congruence." Kelley's colleague at Harvard, John Brewer, proposed specific criteria to use in constructing a congruence index. Eventually one of Brewer's students, Mildred Lincoln, who later served as president of the National Vocational Guidance Association in 1932-1933, dveloped a detailed "Index of Congruence," with profile forms and a scoring manual, which counselors could use "to estimate probability of success in carrying out educational and vocational plans." Lincoln's (1937) Congruence Index has eight scales:

1. comprehensiveness of reasons for choosing occupation

2. utilization of sources of information regarding occupation

3. utilization of sources of counsel and breadth of contacts

4. flexibility of plans

5. status as to economic conditions and educational and social background

6. individual's correspondence with educational requirements of occupation

7. correspondence between requirements of occupation and qualifications of individual

8. ability to carry through objectives

From 1929 to 1937, Lincoln taught the Congruence Index assessment and counseling technique to her graduate students (including Donald Super) in a Teachers College, Columbia University course entitled "Methods and Content for the Course in Occupations." Her Congruence Index appears to be the earliest "vocational maturity scale," although this term would not be introduced until midcentury.

Given the plethora of studies on the STW transition during the late 1930s, one would

expect further advances during the 1940s. Unfortunately, World War II interrupted plans for the

next wave of studies. The two most important STW studies ensuing after WWII were published

in the 1950s: Miller and Form's (1951) study of life patterns in work adjustment and Super's

(1954) study of career patterns.

Miller and Form, both assistant professors of sociology at Kent State University at the

time, devised a social psychological model of the "lifework pattern" that had five periods of

work adjustment: preparatory, initial (i.e., part-time and summer jobs during high school), trial,

stable, and retirement. The trial period is one of "job transition beginning when the worker seeks

his (or her) first full-time job and continuing until he (or she) has secured a work position in

which he (or she) remains three years or more" (p. 637). Miller and Form's classic textbook

includes a chapter on "The Transition from School to Work." In that chapter, they identified six

career orientations with which to characterize youth making the STW transition: the **ambitious**

who are advancing in income or status; the **responsive** who have taken jobs provided or chosen

by their parents; the **fulfilled** who have a permanent job they like; the **confused** who move

erratically from job to job; the **frustrated** who are blocked from moving to a better a job; and the

defeated who repeatedly move downward to jobs with lower income and status. They also

addressed the culture shock and the marginal status experienced on the job by young workers.

Super's efforts to initiate the Career Pattern Study (CPS) in North Carolina were

interrupted in 1942 by his military service. In 1949, he reactivated the idea of conducting a

longitudinal study of careers by writing a working paper that formulated the CPS. According to

the theoretical framework for the CPS (Super, 1957), the years after leaving high school are

devoted to exploratory activity leading to the eventual establishment of an adult career pattern.

The STW transition itself consists of three substages. The **tentative substage**, involves the tasks

of specification and instrumentation, that is, choosing an occupation and getting the required training. The **trial substage** involves the task of implementation, that is, obtaining an initial occupational position and moving so as to zero in on the preferred occupation. The **stabilizing substage** involves securing a viable and suitable position in the preferred occupation.

The critical vocational coping behaviors during these STW substages consist of actions that move one to increasingly more congruent occupational positions. Any action aimed at vocational movement counts, including reading job advertisements and applying for positions. The six main types of vocational movement vary in quality, with three being positive (training, experimenting, and stabilizing) and three being negative (drifting, floundering, and stagnating). Drifting involves random movement to a position which is not logical as a next position, for which the individual lacks aptitude, interest, or preparation, or for which the individual is no better suited than the position being left. Drifting implied being carried along by others or wandering aimlessly from position to position. Floundering means stumbling performance in a position or plunging ahead from one unsuitable position to another. Stagnating involves staying longer than appropriate or remaining in a blind alley job; it involves deterioration because it hurts future occupational possibilities. Training or instrumentation involves preparing to enter a regular adult occupation; it includes further schooling and apprenticeships. Experimenting or trial involves movement from one related job to another in a process of elimination or zeroing in on a position. Stabilizing means settling into a more-or-less permanent position, making a place for oneself. Compared to experimenting, stabilizing shows a lack of doubt. In CPS about one-third of subjects engaged in drifting and floundering during the bulk of the seven years after high school. About one sixth started off drifting and, after three or four years, began to stabilize. At age 25, 80% were stabilizing. Over the longterm (career), the quality of vocational coping behavior during the STW years appears to be more important than actual success in the first or

second job.

In the CPS, the best <u>individual differences predictors</u> of early stabilization were ability, interests, and school achievement. Counselors are well advised to view these individual difference variables from a developmental perspective. For example, Bynner's (1997) longitudinal study shows that problems in developing basic literacy and numeric skills by age ten cause problems in developing work-related skills (verbal skills, construction skills, caring skills, keyboard/computer skills, organizing skills). In turn, problems with work-related skills influence high school achievement, occupational interests, and the STW transition. The best <u>developmental predictors</u> of stabilizing were a **planning orientation to the world of work** and **knowledge about preferred occupation**. These measures add predictive efficiency to the individual differences variables. In short, like the earlier studies by Landy (1940), Lincoln (1937), and Miller and Form (1951), CPS identified the main developmental predictor of a smooth STW transition as **awareness of choices to be made and information and planning bearing on these choices**.

It should be noted that the CPS, along with the historic studies that preceded it, took place under different economic and labor market conditions than exist today, and their research participants were disproportionately white males. Accordingly, contemporary replication and extension of these findings to diverse groups and a global economy is desirable. Nevertheless, these classic studies, and the extensive empirical literature accumulated during the intervening years, suggest that career development theory's conceptualization of the STW transition, with its accompanying inventories, offers a viable model and useful methods for understanding how workbound youth move school to work, from career exploration to occupational establishment, and from adolescence to adulthood

Since the completion of the CPS, two decades of additonal research using the

developmental perspective on the STW transition have identified specific types of awareness, information, and planning that advance the careers of students who are moving from school to work. The specific career development attitudes and competencies studied by researchers are intervening variables that connect vocational coping responses to developmental task stimuli. As such, career development attitudes and competencies mediate how well individuals implement their self-concepts as they move from education to occupation. Each specific attitude and competence has been linguistically explained and operationally defined by psychometric instruments that counselors can use to assess the degree of progress students are making in developing their careers and preparing to adapt to the work world (Savickas, 1984).

The awareness and planning aspects of career choice and the STW transition have been shown to constitute two distinct factors that condition educational/vocational decision making and the implementation of career choices, one attitudinal and the other cognitive. The attitudinal or conative dimension consists of dispositional response tendencies that shape readiness to choose a career and subsequent work adaptability. Super emphasized the critical importance of positive attitudes toward planning (e.g., planfulness) and exploration. Crites (1978), another CPS team member, chose to emphasize more specific attitudes including involvement in the career development process, independence in making choices, willingness to make realistic compromises, preference for intrinsic rewards, and decisiveness.

The cognitive dimension of readiness for the school-to-work transition concentrates on information and planning that bears on choosing an occupation and securing a position in it. Super emphasized two career competencies. The first is information about the work world. The second is knowledge about the principles and practice of career decision making. An important predictor of success in the STW transition combines these two competencies. The more information that individuals possess about the occupation they have decided on, the more likely

they will smoothly establish themselves in it. Crites (1978) again described more specific

competencies: self-knowledge, occupational information, matching self-to-occupation, planning,

and problem solving. Developing positive attitudes toward planning and exploring, along with

increasing competence at making choices and formulating plans, has become the focus of

methods and materials aimed at facilitating the STW transition for workbound youth.

<p style="text-align:center">Facilitating the STW Transition</p>

Based on the classic research outlined in the previous section, and the extensive empirical

literature accumulated during the intervening years, it seems safe to conclude that career

development theory offers counselors a useful model for understanding the STW transition of

workbound youth. The second charge to authors of articles in this special issue was to discuss

how their theories can be used to facilitate the STW transition. Just by way of introduction to the

numerous products of developmental research on the STW transition, I will describe briefly four

examples of counseling materials and methods designed to facilitate the STW transition.

Recall that the developmental model for the STW transition emphasizes orientation to

upcoming vocational development tasks and instruction in vocational coping behaviors that deal

with these tasks, especially planning and exploring. Looking ahead and looking around develops

competence and skill in five critical domains: self-knowledge, occupational information,

decision making, planning, and problem solving. These competencies condition placement

readiness (Stevens, 1973), effective vocational coping behaviors, and early stabilization. Thus,

career development materials are used to <u>orient</u> people to career development tasks, <u>teach</u> skills

for planning and exploring, <u>coach</u> career management techniques, and <u>rehearse</u> problem solving.

The four types of materials that I describe, in turn, each represent one of these four intervention

methods for fostering career development of workbound youth negotiating the STW transition.

Orienting: Comprehension of Careers

Career orientation explicitly fosters awareness of tasks to be faced and decisions to made. Career development theorists have used different terms to denote this orientation, including anticipation (Tiedeman & O'Hara, 1963), awareness (Harren, 1979), involvement (Crites, 1965), planfulness (Super & Overstreet, 1960), and time perspective (Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, & Herma, 1951). Each of these career theorists thus endorses the maxim that "prior planning prevents poor performance." To prompt planning, they recommend that counselors and teachers offer students "anticipatory guidance" that fosters planning attitudes, competencies, and activities. This orientation seeks to make students aware of and familiar with imminent developmental tasks as well as encourages them to consider how they will cope with these tasks. One of many effective orientation techniques is discussing items on career development inventories (Crites, 1974), such as the Career Maturity Inventory (Crites, 1978) and the Adult Career Concerns Inventory (Super, Thompson, & Lindeman, 1988). The items, rather than assessment devices, become topics used to prompt guided discussion. As students discuss the inventory items and their rationales, they become oriented to the developmental tasks involved in career decision making as well as develop attitudes that bear on these tasks (Savickas, 1990).

Teaching: Competence at Planning and Exploring

Orientation concentrates on career awareness and fosters the development of positive attitudes toward planning and exploring. In contrast, teaching concentrates on developing cognitive competencies and behavioral skills that students may use to advance their career. Examples of teaching methods that help students learn career choice and work adjustment competencies appear in numerous career education curriculum guides. For example, Career Decision Making: Teaching the Process (Savickas & Crites, 1981; Savickas, 1990) is a high school course curriculum consisting of 20 lesson plans that develop students' career planning and

exploration skills. One lesson deals with how "Work Is Different From School." This exploration lesson aims to curtail "surprise" and "culture shock" among adolescent newcomers to the adult workforce (Wanous, 1977; Louis, 1980). The lesson seeks to teach students five distinctions between school and work from Miller and Form (1951, p. 622) and five additional distinctions made by Savickas. For example, students learn that school and work differ in membership permanency. Each student belongs in school and has an assured place, even when they experience or cause problems. In contrast, workers who cause problems quickly lose their positions. A second distinction involves means and ends to advance. In school, each student is expected to advance to the next grade, the means are clear, and support is offered. At work, only a few of the better performing employees are permitted to advance, the means are ambiguous, and little if any support is offered. Learning about these two, and eight more, distinctions provides students with information and skills that they can use in making the STW transition.

Coaching: Career Management Techniques

Individuals with similar levels of academic success in school vary in the success that they achieve on the job. Cognitive psychologists contend that the differences in job success and satisfaction are only partially explained by ability and motivation (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). The remaining variability may be attributed to individual differences in tacit knowledge. New workers with practical intelligence about managing their careers and dealing with coworkers fare much better at stabilizing in a job.

Knowing the employer's social expectation for employees and preferred methods for meeting these expectations allows new workers to adapt better by consciously managing their responses. Programmatic research on the developmental tasks and coping responses involved in stabilizing in a new position has produced information about the formal requirements of adapting to a new job. Studies have identified the tacit knowledge and practical intelligence of individual

who have mastered the vocational development tasks involved in stabilizing in a new job (e.g.,

Dix & Savickas, 1995; Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). This information has been converted into

career management tips which career coaches use in coaching newcomers to work in an

organization (Dix & Savickas, 1995; Savickas, 1993). One intervention explicitly coaches

clients in six types of coping behaviors that, respectively, deal with managing the tasks of

organizational fusion, position performance, coworker relations, work habits and attitudes,

advancement, and career planning. For example, tips for adapting to the culture of the work

organization include (1) acquire knowledge about the company and its culture, (2) be a team

player, (3) make quality contacts with coworkers, (4) learn from the experts in the organization,

(5) focus on the big picture, (6) change oneself to fit the organization, (7) do any task to get the

job done, and (8) establish credibility with coworkers.

Role Rehearsal: Preparation for Job Problems

A fourth method for fostering the STW transition involves rehearsal that prepares

students to solve problems that occur at work. This can include role-taking such as part-time

jobs, yet role-rehearsal really means vicarious preparation for and practice at solving typical

problems that arise on the job. Role rehearsal often includes role-playing (e.g., psychodrama

skits) and discussion of case studies. It usually involves student-centered, problem-based

learning (PBL) rather than teacher-centered orientation, teaching, and coaching. Preparation for

and practice at problem solving can help to increase students' work adaptability and, in turn,

adjustment to their first full-time job. One example of work-role rehearsal materials is projective

techniques such as the Vocational Apperception Technique and sentence completions.

Counselors can use these projective materials to predict and assess how students will react to job

problems. For example, Savickas (1991) devised a method for using Crites (1982) work

adjustment sentence completion form in role rehearsal. Students respond to the sentence stems,

then the counselor discusses these responses one at a time. The discussion uncovers "better

responses" and helps clients practice enacting these responses at their worksites. Better

responses are defined along a four-point continuum of increasing complexity: dependence on

the work group, independence among people in the work group, interdependence between people

in the work group, and individuation within a work group of equals. Clients tend to be interested

in and willing to try responses that are one step higher than their current responses. A detailed

scoring manual gives counselors sample responses at each of the four levels for each of the 20

sentence stems (Buboltz & Savickas, 1995). For example, one stem states, "When Mark's

supervisor said, 'Look, we'll do it my way and that's all I want to hear about it,' Mark said..."

Responses to this item can be scored at one of the four levels ranging from Level 1 (e.g., "You're

the boss and I'll do it anyway you say.") to Level 4 (e.g., "That's fine. I want to learn more about

the job and how you would like this job done. Can we get together soon to talk about it? I'm

really looking forward to hearing your ideas and sharing some of my ideas with you.").

These four examples of career development interventions to facilitate the STW transition

merely illustrate a myriad of techniques used in career education. Career education programs

across the USA use orienting, teaching, coaching, and rehearsing to foster career development.

Readers who wish to learn more about how career education programs implement career

development theory to prepare students for the STW transition are encouraged to consult three

references that, respectively, explain career education models, methods, and outcomes. The first,

a classic text on career education entitled Career Education: A Lifelong Process (Fuller &

Whealon, 1979) explains the philosophy and history of career education as well as describes

models for curriculum integration and teacher preparation. The second reference, Herr and

Cramer's (1996) encyclopedic Career Guidance and Counseling through the Lifespan, discusses

methods for implementing career education activities and programs. The third reference, a meta-

analysis of the effects of career education interventions by Baker and Taylor (in press), provides

a comprehensive review of empirical evaluations of career education program outcomes.

Conclusion

Career development theory offers a well-researched model for understanding the STW

transition as well as effective methods and materials for facilitating the process. Furthermore,

there is a strong empirical base that documents the outcomes teachers and counselor can expect

when they use career development interventions to smooth the STW transition. Teachers and

counselors who wish to facilitate the STW transition can use orienting, teaching, coaching, and

rehearsing to increase their students' **awareness of the choices to be made and information**

and planning that bears on these choices.

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