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The Career Key: Helping Middle School Students Worldwide

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"...these instruments help students become more aware of themselves their interests, personality, and values; relate these characteristics to possible occupations; expand the number of occupations that they are considering; and stimulate their career exploration behavior..."

Middle school students need to become more aware of careers, explore their career options, and understand how the choices they make in school will affect their future. A recent national survey showed that adults in the U.S. believe that more needs to be done in these areas (Hoyt & Lester, 1995). These needs are also reflected in the recent national standards set by the American School Counseling Association (1997): students will (a) "acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decisions," (b) "employ strategies to achieve future career success and satisfaction," and (c) "understand the relationship between personal qualities, education and training, and the world of work" (p. 24).

To help students achieve these goals, school counselors frequently use a self-directed career interest inventory, like Holland's Self-Directed Search (Holland, 1985) as a part of classroom career guidance. Typically, these instruments help students become more aware of themselves their interests, personality, and values; relate these characteristics to possible occupations; expand the number of occupations that they are considering; and stimulate their career exploration behavior such as talking with parents or teachers about possible occupations. These instruments are particularly attractive to school counselors in schools with limited resources who wish to provide career guidance at a low counselor time investment. This article describes one of these instruments, the Career Key (Jones, 1997)--a free public service on the Internet--and its potential for helping students worldwide.

The Career Key on the Internet

The Career Key (CK) (www.ncsu.edu/careerkey) assesses individuals' resemblance to six personality types: Realistic (R), Investigative (I), Artistic (A), Social (S), Enterprising (E), and Conventional (C) (Holland, 1995.) Users respond to questions regarding their interests, self-view, abilities, and values. Their responses are computer-scored for the RIASEC types. Based on their resemblance to each of the six types, users are directed to occupations that most closely fit their profile.

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They check those in which they are interested, and a personalized list of occupations is created. Each of these occupations is linked to the section in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH)(U.S. Department of Labor, 1998) in which that occupation is described: the nature of the work, its job outlook, training required, related occupations, and other vital information. The CK is the first and only computer-guidance system with this link to the OOH. CK users can also go to various educational modules to learn about such topics as career exploration strategies and decision making.

Another benefit of the CK website is that users can print out an 8-page paper-pencil, camera-ready version of the CK. This has been particularly helpful to counselors, educators, and other youth leaders who make multiple copies to use with their students or clients. There are no royalty or licensing fees as long as the copies are used for educational, nonprofit purposes.

Studies of the original Career Key published in 1987 (Jones, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1993) showed that its psychometric characteristics, helpfulness, and effects were similar to other instruments of this type. The results of the first study of the Internet paper-pencil version have just been analyzed and are quite promising (Jones, Sheffield, & Joyner, 1998). When eighth grade students' satisfaction with the CK was compared with those who took the Self-Directed Search Career Explorer (SDSCE; Holland & Powell, 1994) and the Job-O Enhanced (Job-OE; Cutler, Ferry, Kauk, & Robinett, 1995), there were no significant differences. The students gave all three instruments positive ratings. The majority of them reported that it was a good use of their time, that they would recommend to their friends, and that it encouraged them to learn more about occupations.

Among the other comparisons made between the instruments, in no instance was the SDSCE or Job-OE found superior to the CK. On the other hand, the CK, when compared with the other two instruments, (a) suggested a greater number of occupations to the students and (b) took less time on average to complete (the means were: CK = 25 min., SDSCE = 57 min., and Job-OE = 72 min.), allowing more time for other career guidance activities.

The CK has become a popular website for young people and adults. It has recorded over 300,000 visits in the past 20 months. The CK has also attracted international attention. Requests for information have been received from Australia, South Africa, Canada, Spain and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong). The next section describes the Career Key project in Hong Kong, which illustrates how the CK can be developed to benefit middle school students worldwide.

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M E R I D I A N

The Career Key

The Career Key in Hong Kong

Career counseling and guidance services are comparatively under-developed in Hong Kong and as a result, there is a great need among youth and adults for this kind of help. At present, no career-testing instruments are used in the secondary schools. The Asian financial crisis has seriously affected this city. It is suffering from an economic recession with a 5.5% unemployment rate, which is the highest in 17 years. The Gross Domestic Product decreased 5.2% in the second quarter of this year. Therefore, the introduction of the Career Key in Hong Kong is timely and needed. This project will serve as a pioneering effort to establish a career development and testing Web site for Hong Kong. It will be the first of its kind on the Web. This new Web site will also be applicable for the rest of China, Taiwan, Singapore and other countries with Chinese populations.

The Hong Kong Association of Career Masters and Guidance Masters (HKACMGM) initiated a Chinese version of the Career Key. In May of 1997, the authors completed groundbreaking work directed towards understanding career development and services in Hong Kong. During a trip to Hong Kong, the authors visited universities and government offices, met with HKACMGM officials, counseling professionals, and secondary school teachers, and also presented a paper on this topic in a public university seminar. The responses to the project have been positive and encouraging.

Support for this trip and the project has come from a diverse group of organizations. Besides the HKACMGM, this group includes North Carolina State University's College of Education and Psychology, the Counseling Services at the City University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Department of Labour, and the Hong Kong Rotary Club. In addition, student services at other universities are very supportive including the Office of Student Affairs at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Career Services at the University of Hong Kong.

Author Dr. Ting is leading efforts to find funds to translate and test the CK in the field in Hong Kong. The authors plan to set up the Web site by September, 1999 and select the secondary schools in Hong Kong to participate in the field-testing.

The Career Key Worldwide

"Using advanced Internet technology, the authors can adapt the Career Key to other countries and places ..."



Drs. Ting and Jones meet with career counselor Mr. Raysen Cheung at City University of Hong Kong.

The Career Key

Occupational Outlook Handbook

Hunger and Public Action

"By providing accurate,

practical
employment
information to
all its citizens, a
country
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citizens to make
informed
decisions ..."

The CK has strong potential for worldwide use. Using advanced Internet technology, the authors can adapt the Career Key to other countries and places such as Hong Kong. Many countries already have a Web site similar to the one the U.S. Department of Labor has for its *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (www.bls.gov/ocohome.htm), or a site could be created. Once established, hyperlinks between occupational descriptions and the CK can be easily set up. In the process of developing new versions of the CK in other countries, the authors look forward to collaborating with counseling professionals in preparing accurate translations, developing superior CK websites and conducting field-testing studies of their effectiveness.

The CK can play a valuable role in strengthening the economies of developing countries. For example, the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economics, Amartya Sen (Dreze & Sen, 1998), has brought to our attention the vital importance of employment creation and democratic institutions in famine prevention. The decisive role of public action is illustrated not only by the elimination of famines in India since independence, but also by the unsung and underappreciated achievements of many African countries. These experiences firmly demonstrate the potential to end famines if public support (e.g. in the form of employment creation) is well planned on a regular basis to protect the entitlements of vulnerable groups. By providing accurate, practical employment information to all its citizens, a country empowers those citizens to make informed decisions and act in their best self-interest and, ultimately, the best interest of the country.

Counseling professionals agree that effective career guidance and services can enhance job satisfaction, reduce changing of jobs and increase job stability. To help prevent famines in developing and underdeveloped countries, career guidance and services can enhance job placement and full utilization of employment opportunities. The Career Key can contribute to: raising individual's aspirations; making informed career choices; and having easy access to services. In light of this perspective, the Career Key has unlimited potential to be developed for international use to benefit youth and adults in different countries of the world.

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