

Careers Education at the Crossroads

The broad theme of this issue of the journal is careers education and guidance (CEG) in secondary schools in England. Once again, we find ourselves at a crossroads as careers education prepares itself for yet another of its periodic metamorphoses. It remains to be seen whether careers education emerges stronger or weaker from this expected transformation. Of course, none of this matters unless you are a professional working in the field who feels that careers education is chronically undervalued.

Every Child Matters, the reform of Key Stage 3 and, above all, the 14-19 reforms will drive the transformation of careers education in the next few years; and what emerges could be better than what we had before. The nagging suspicion is that the underlying weakness and immaturity of the careers education field will resurface. Until there is a route in initial teacher training for careers teachers and a section in the curriculum division of the DfES that focuses on careers education, improvement will be hampered. In the opening article, David Andrews, NICEC Chair and Senior Fellow, shows how the position of careers education in secondary schools in England has fluctuated in line with changing political priorities in the curriculum from the 1970s to the present day. He poses some interesting questions about the choices that need to be made if careers education policy is to recover from its relatively weak position currently. The Government appears to have made the connection between the provision of good information, advice and guidance (IAG) and the effective implementation of its 14-19 reforms; but it seems not to recognise that effective career development learning (careers education) is part of that equation too. David Andrews suggests that employers involved in the development of specialised diplomas could, perhaps, exert their influence on the Government to raise the profile of CEG. He also hints at the need for civil servants in the Curriculum Division of the DfES to oversee careers education policy – looking back, it is remarkable the difference that capable and pro-active civil servants made to the development and importance of careers education in 1987-8, 1994-7 and 2001-3. The pattern seems to be that we re-launch careers education policy every seven years. That could make 2008 a very interesting year!

Bill Law adds weight to the maxim 'What do they know of CEG that only CEG know!' He uses his deep understanding of psychology, sociology and cultural theory to argue the need for more radical curriculum structures

and learning processes. He believes that careers education will flourish when it is pulled more into the centre of the curriculum. He too is drawing attention to the relatively weak position of careers education in the curriculum as it clings to the edge of the timetable. Inadequate inputs and weak curriculum structures have eroded the careers education base so that it focuses almost entirely on 'procedural knowledge' (i.e. how to do a CV, complete the paperwork for work experience and fill out a college/UCAS form). There is no time for more challenging goals related to boosting the self-esteem of young people, helping them to make sense of their own story and life roles, clarifying their work values, improving self-efficacy and decision-making, exploring the world of work and preparing for lifelong career development. Bill argues that only a more ambitious 'life role relevant' curriculum can make a real difference to young people's lives.

Many of the issues raised by David Andrews and Bill Law are taken up by Barbara McGowan in her account of a fifteen-month career-development project in the London Borough of Islington. She presents the RIP framework which she developed to help the schools focus on what it is that they were managing and how to manage it better. It is a beguilingly simple but effective matrix of nine elements that need to be considered in planning, delivering and evaluating careers education provision. Bill Law commented that progress moves in the direction of complexity. The RIP model can accommodate increasing complexity and make it seem more manageable. Both Barbara and Bill are holding out hopes that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) will reflect some of this new thinking about careers education in developing their current proposals for curriculum reform. Bill Law's exploration of the impact of cultural change on the way we need to approach careers education now is reflected in Leigh Henderson's and Brian Stevens's article about the development of the Signposter Programme. The development of online services for young people such as Connexions Direct, 'the site' and 'b-live' are changing the way that young people get help for themselves. The development of e-portfolios is also changing the way that young people plan, record and present the evidence of their personal career development. The Signposter Programme is one example of a commercial enterprise to provide an e-portfolio and information service on lifestyle choices, learning and employment opportunities for 14-year-olds upwards.