

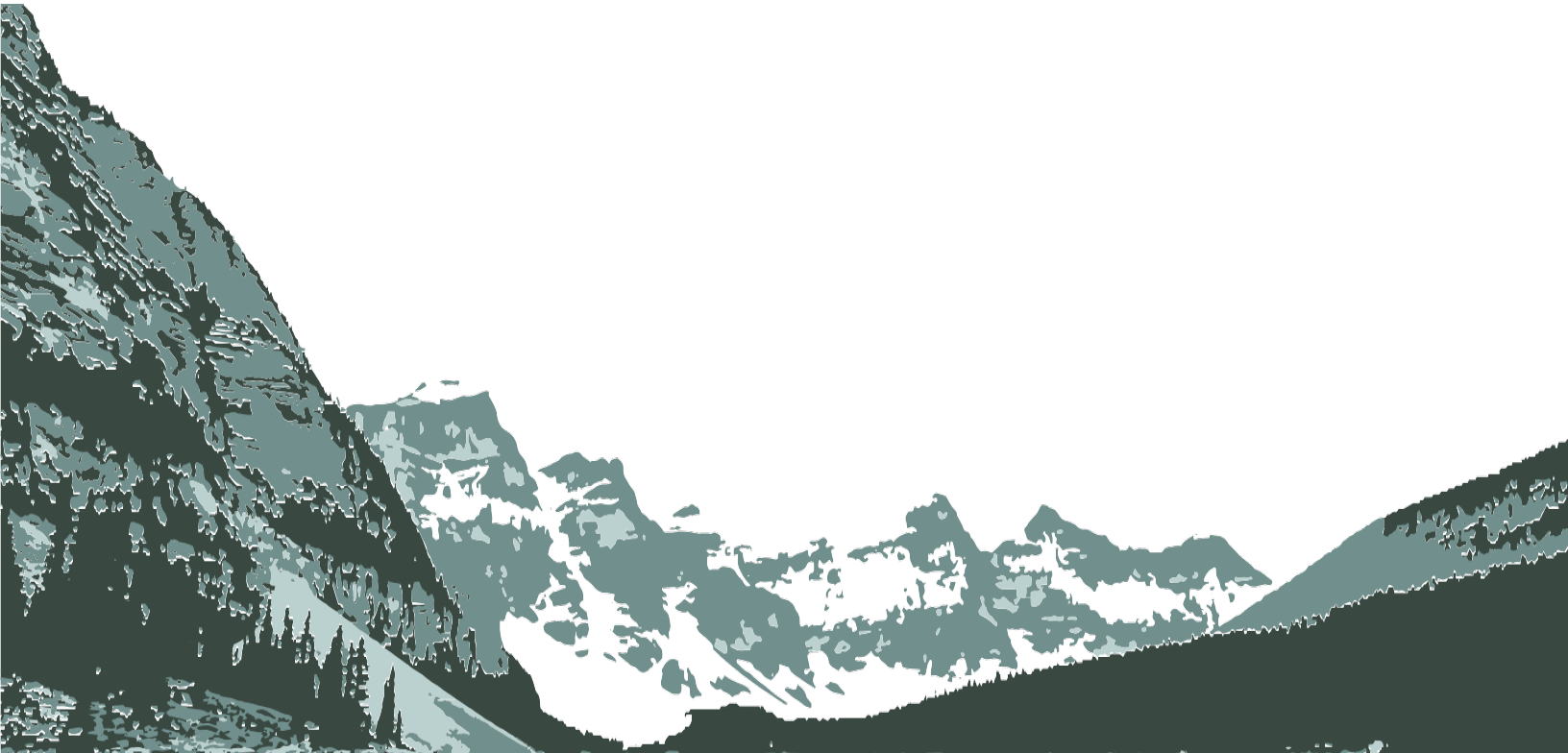
SFU

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# CONNECTING CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

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## Goals and Project Description



## Significance and Rationale

An alarming number of Canadian youth are experiencing mental health challenges. The Canadian Centre for Addictions and Mental Health note that the vast majority (70%) of adult mental health problems originate in adolescence, and over 1/3 of high school students express moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety or depression (Boak et al., 2016). This finding was echoed by the World Health Organization (WHO): around the world, depression is the leading cause of adolescent illness, and suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in this population (WHO, 2018). Canadian data also show significantly elevated rates of mental health concerns and suicidal behaviour for vulnerable youth, including sexual minority youth (Peter et al., 2017), immigrant, refugee, and racialized populations (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016), adolescents in the child welfare system (Underwood, 2011), and Indigenous youth (Government of Canada, 2006). Rather than focusing exclusively on emergency and remedial treatment, the WHO (2018) suggests, “mental health promotion and prevention are key to helping adolescents thrive” (p. 1). The Mental Health Commission of Canada’s (2016) strategic policy further specifies these efforts should include targeted programs for promoting adolescent mental health that are both community and school-based.

## Goals and Objectives

Connecting Career Development and Mental Health in Schools (CCDMH) is a collaborative and growing partnership among researchers (Simon Fraser University and the University of Calgary), school districts (Surrey School District, Central Okanagan School District, New Brunswick Anglophone School Districts), provincial Ministries (British Columbia Ministry of Education, New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Saskatchewan Ministry of Immigration and Career Training), and community organizations (Saskatoon Industry Education Council). Our overarching research agenda has four primary goals:

- To develop, evaluate and refine career development interventions (co-developed & delivered by educational professionals) that confer the most positive influence on mental health for adolescents;

- To advance an evidence-based understanding of the relationships between the outcomes of effective career development practices and the determinants of adolescent mental health;
- To demonstrate a relationship between career interventions in schools (at both the curriculum level and the guidance/counselling level) and positive student mental health; and
- To inform school practice and policy at community, provincial and national levels using the evidence base for career development as a pillar of positive mental health and a shared responsibility.

These partnership development activities will be guided by the following specific **questions**:

1. How might a collaborative partnership, spanning unique educational contexts in different jurisdictions in Canada, inform career development interventions and policies supporting youth mental health in Canadian schools?
2. How do conceptions and practices of career development as a mental health intervention change for educational professionals who receive training in career development and mental health?
3. How, through focused training, can educational professionals (e.g., guidance counsellors, teachers of career curriculum, administrators) become more intentional about the impact of career development interventions on mental health?
4. What are the impacts on adolescent career development and adjustment upon receiving career development interventions from educators trained in career development and mental health?

The CCDMH project supports the broad objectives of both the SSHRC Connections and Insight programs. With regard to the Connections Program, the CCDMH project will enable social sciences knowledge to flow among scholars and multiple community and government stakeholders, enhancing the potential impact of the project across all kinds of knowledge users. It includes academic and non-academic partners, as well as a broad scope of project collaborators, with primary beneficiaries being practitioners offering direct services and the students they serve. The collaborative design of the project will not only establish networks of practice in both research and applied settings, but will lay the foundation for sustainable work into the future. With regard to the Insight Program, the CCDMH project will make important contributions to our knowledge about the connections between career development and adolescent mental health across Canada, and provide a

foundation for developing innovative, developmental/preventative approaches to one of society's most pressing concerns. With an initial location in two leading Canadian universities, the CCDMH project will provide excellent opportunities for the support of graduate students and the development of highly-qualified personnel. This partnership will bring active participants together for a concluding symposium to share regional results and build a foundation for broader dissemination of the research impact. In sum, this project aims to establish and mobilize partnerships with key stakeholders towards the goals of improving understanding of the connections between modern and effective career development practices, promoting positive mental health in adolescents, and developing career interventions.

## Research Context

There is compelling evidence that foundations of mental health – both positive and negative - laid during adolescence have an enduring effect into adulthood. Robertson (2019a) concluded that adolescence and young adulthood may be critical periods for establishing sound mental health throughout adulthood, and there is compelling evidence that career development may be a key determinant and important pillar for promoting positive youth mental health outcomes (Robertson, 2019b). Indeed, developmental theorists (e.g., Erikson, 1968) and researchers (e.g., Arnett, 2004) agree that preparing for one's career is one of the primary developmental tasks of adolescence, and success in this preparation is important for subsequent adjustment. For example, career preparation at any point in high school has been shown to predict adjustment (e.g., anxiety, depression, emotional disturbance) and psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, social adaptation) after graduating high school (Skorikov, 2007). Canada's youth bring aspirations for meaningful work into a changing occupational landscape. We propose that schools and school systems, with dedicated career curricula and guidance counsellors, would be an ideal place to develop and evaluate emerging, stakeholder-informed career interventions designed to promote mental health among adolescents. We anticipate that youth who are helped to make informed decisions based on knowledge of their career options and their personal identities will develop a confidence and capacity to achieve their career goals, and this will serve the dual purpose of (a) supporting youth to achieve a key developmental task, and (b) offering a non-stigmatizing, preventative intervention with mental health benefits.

There is emerging evidence of the impact that effective modern career development interventions have on variables such as confidence (Janeiro, Mota, &

Ribas, 2014), hope (Amundson, Goddard, Niles, Yoon, & Schmidt, 2016), self-efficacy (van Der Horst & Klehe, 2019), self-determination (Santilli, Nota, & Hartung, 2019), purpose (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008;) and sense of connection (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2014). Concomitantly, recent advances in the conceptualization of mental health (Huppert & Cooper, 2014; Keyes, 2002; Orpana, Vachon, Dykxhoorn, Mcrae, & Jayaraman, 2016) have resulted in the identification of core determinants or key components of mental health. However, a significant challenge lies in practitioners' perceptions of their capacity for effecting mental health outcomes. Strategies for increasing practitioner awareness and competence have been described in an upcoming book on career development and mental health (Redekopp & Huston, in press).

There appears to be considerable overlap between the career intervention outcomes and the determinants of mental health, and the focus of our research is to explore the nature of this relationship. Moreover, there is increasing recognition within the field that this kind of scholarship is most effectively conducted with the active participation of knowledge users, rather than by academics working in isolation (Domene & Socholotiuk, 2018; Magnusson & Hiebert, 2016; Young & Domene, 2012).

## Background of the Connecting Career Development and Mental Health (CCDMH) Project

For the past year, we conducted an extensive review of the literature, building understanding of the explicit and implicit connections between career development interventions and mental health. Other topics, such as career development and mental illness, work and mental illness, work and mental health/ wellbeing, ethics and career development and the evaluation of mental health/wellbeing outcomes in career development contexts were also explored. The findings of the literature review contributed to the development of a workshop for career development practitioners (i.e., career educators, employment counsellors) that included specific interventions to promote career development while making a positive impact on client mental. We evaluated the feasibility of a workshop-style training for career educators to (a) see their clients more holistically and (b) feel better prepared to offer career interventions while simultaneously promoting their clients' mental health with 8 groups in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Informal impact data were collected (i.e., participant assessments of changes to their knowledge, skills and attitudes) from

participants ( $N = 229$ ) on 12 outcome variables, using Magnusson and Hiebert's (2016) post-pre approach to program evaluation.

Analysis revealed that participating in the workshops considerably increased practitioner awareness of the relationship between career development and mental health, and increased their knowledge of the methods by which they could work with clients to improve or impact this relationship. The largest gains were found for “recognizing ways in which I can evaluate the mental health impact of my organization’s career development services,” “appreciate the need to communicate the mental health impact of my career intervention/practice with clients,” and “aware of how mental health concerns play a part in career development practice.” These three findings suggest a major shift in practitioner intentionality as a result of the training. Participants also expressed substantial changes to their knowledge, skills and attitudes of the connections between career development and mental health. Although these preliminary results are promising, the training was designed for practitioners working with adults; we need to extend the training with developmentally appropriate content adaptations to suit the needs of school-based practitioners. We also need to institute more formal and rigorous research methodologies to be confident of the results, and to determine if the interventions generalize across contexts and regions. Taken together, existing findings suggest a need to have key educational stakeholders working together to address the complexity of youth mental health.

## Approach and General Methodology

A crucial component of the project is the development of a collaborative framework for exploring the key research questions. We anticipate significant shaping of design, emphasis, and specific content to arise from the process of collaboration. As a general framework, we are guided by standards for career and counselling impact strategies (Magnusson & Hiebert, 2016; Hiebert & Magnusson, 2014). The framework builds on earlier work emphasizing four levels of data collection for impact assessment: treatment fidelity (the extent to which the providers of an intervention followed the intervention protocols); participant fidelity (the extent to which participants engaged in and followed the intervention); outcomes (changes in knowledge, skills or attitudes as a result of an intervention); and impacts (global change in the desired results of interventions, in this case, represented as positive changes to determinants of mental health for youth). In general terms, data is collected that links *process* (what practitioners actually do) with *outcomes* (how do clients - in this case students - change as a result of what practitioners do). The framework also emphasizes the need for all stakeholders to be involved in the design of the actual impact

assessment methods. These collaborative decisions include reaching consensus on the core measures of mental health for youth, the range and number of participants from each partner group, and the mechanisms to be used for data collection.

Magnusson and Hiebert's framework for impact assessment falls within the general methodological stance of "developmental evaluation" (Patton, 2010). Patton argues that social innovation - especially with complex issues - is best supported by working in collaboration with program decision makers and partners. Because the issues are so complex, a recurring cycle of innovation, testing, adapting and retesting is required, with the full engagement of all stakeholders. Patton goes on to argue that in such complex environments, even the focus for intervention might need to change as new understandings emerge. For example, in educational settings, an educator may develop new insight into a phenomenon as a result of training, and then apply this insight to the creation of an intervention for students "in the moment." Havighurst (1952) referred to this as recognizing a "teachable moment." It is impossible to have an a priori understanding of what that moment may be, nor of what the inspired intervention might be, and so while traditional quasi-experimental designs might be considered, they are not by default presumed to be the best fit for this project. It will remain critical to establish baseline measures of youth mental health prior to interventions in order to help identify changes as a result of the interventions, but it also becomes important to carefully document what the practitioners do, and to then link those actions to the outcomes for their clients. In this way the evaluation model evolves with each iteration, but also provides the means and the impetus for successful innovations to be rapidly scaled up to increase benefits for all within the system.