Who wants to play "*Careers*"?
New research into young people's priorities and the future of careers guidance

Karen Vaughan

Last year in a TradeMe auction I won the 1973 version of the Parker Brothers' game of Careers, updated from the 1951 original. It cost me $7.00 (nobody else bid). I played Careers with some of my colleagues one Friday evening after work. Each of us wrote a "success formula" at the start of the game that dictated how much happiness, fame, and money we sought or bought (yes, in this game you could actually purchase happiness). We collected and traded "opportunity cards" to enter different careers and achieve various categories of success. For example, a career in teaching offered happiness while careers in the arts and politics offered fame. Careers in science offered fame and happiness (but not money) and, interestingly, careers in ecology offered a combination of happiness, fame, and money.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that choosing careers is a game—the planning and development of careers is a very serious matter, especially for young people leaving school. It is a responsibility they face today in ways that previous generations did not. They are now required to engage in a series of decisions, beginning at school, that will shape their lives, careers, and pathways (Vaughan, 2003) because there is a "maze" of career opportunities that means "a reliable and enjoyable career cannot be left to chance" (Career Services rapuara, n.d.). Steve Maharey, the Associate Minister for Education (Tertiary), has emphasised the gravity of these decisions, saying that people should consider "what's at stake" and approach tertiary education decisions "with the same degree of care and preparation that they would apply to any other major life decision, such as buying a home or travelling overseas" (Maharey, cited in Career Services rapuara, 2004, p. 12). Today these decisions start earlier and earlier in secondary school, and making them is a big and relatively new pressure for young people. Some are quite overwhelmed by the number of choices they need to make, the volume of information they

have to process, and their comparatively weak position as an informed consumer of tertiary education programmes (Vaughan, 2005).

This situation was a key prompt for the Pathways and Prospects study by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, which was begun in 2004 to find out about what young people make of this transition.[1] The study has been investigating the pathways and career-related experiences and perspectives of 114 young people who left secondary school in 2003 and opted into modern apprenticeships, the army, polytechnic vocational and foundation courses, university degree programmes, university bridging courses,[2] and youth training courses. The focus on young people who had made a recognised pathway choice was deliberate—we wanted to know what young people who were ostensibly "doing pathways properly" thought about what they were doing. Sometimes you can learn a lot by examining the apparently ordinary or *un*problematic groups or situations in society.

The study also deliberately challenged policy and research approaches that typically track young people's post-school *activities* and then draw conclusions about the state of their *transition*. Measuring how many people get a job or enrol in a course cannot tell us anything about *how* different young people actually *make sense of* their choices and what those choices *mean* to them.

We interviewed 114 young people early in 2004 as they began their new programmes, and interviewed 103 of them again 10–15 months later. We asked them to tell their stories of negotiating pathways, describe and reflect on choices and choice-making processes, and share their opinions about goal setting, being a particular age, and work–life balance. We also asked them to share their hopes and fears for the future.

The analysis of their stories raises some very interesting challenges for career practitioners and for those who

Interview transcripts often produce a lot of data and Pathways and Prospects was no exception. Our interviews with young people covered many different themes and topics. However, two major themes stood out:

- a drive for *security*; and
- a desire for *exploration*.

support young people in tertiary programmes and employment. For a start, the research underlines the need to keep rethinking the idea of "career". Playing the game of Careers with colleagues highlighted interesting shifts for adults. Information from the Pathways and Prospects study is challenging adults' commonly held assumptions about how transition should work and what post-school pathways mean to young people. The rest of this article turns to this analysis, drawing on the recent report from the project, *Young People Producing Careers and Identities* (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006).

Going deeper: analysing young people's stories

Interview transcripts often produce a lot of data and Pathways and Prospects was no exception. Our interviews with young people covered many different themes and topics. However, two major themes stood out:

- a drive for *security*; and
- a desire for *exploration*.

We used these two themes to help us make sense of the data. We devised 15 "indicators" —low-to-high scales—to measure different aspects of security and exploration. Indicators were items such as "importance of financial security", "planning involved in entering current option", "self-exploration", and "commitment to alternative/different pathways". We rated each interview against each indicator. By grouping together interviews that were most alike in their ratings, we were able to build four different interview clusters, each with its own distinctive profile and each exemplifying aspects of security and exploration. The clusters are shown in Table 1, with a maxim that serves as a kind of shorthand for the overall outlook of each category.

The clusters became a lens through which to examine different young people's perspectives, trajectories, motivations, and outlooks. They provide a framework for seeing how different young people are pushed and pulled by different forms of security and exploration.

The analysis of these forces opens up fresh possibilities for supporting young people in their career development.

The Hopeful Reactors: searching for security

The Hopeful Reactors formed the smallest of the four clusters. In this group, young people with few or no school qualifications who were also taking the less prestigious pathway options were distinctly over-represented when compared with other clusters (just over half had no school qualifications and less than 20 percent had achieved NCEA level 2). Youth trainees and army personnel, mainly soldiers, were over-represented, as were Pacific peoples, Māori, and women. This cluster included no university students.

These interviewees were concerned about a lack of post-school options and planning when leaving school, and about attaining financial security. Their pathway options tended to represent an escape from, or avoidance of, something negative or potentially damaging in their lives or the communities from which they came. They tended to have entered their pathway option at the direction of their school, after finding they had few or no real alternatives. Although Hopeful Reactors had low ratings for "career identity" and often little sense of long-term purpose or interest in their pathway option, they were very committed to it in the short term. They used their pathway options to pursue the kind of success as learners that eluded them at secondary school. For them, that "success" was partly contingent upon remaining with the pathway, even when (as in some cases) it was no longer engaging or leading to long-term possibilities.

The Confident Explorers: exploring futures

The Confident Explorers comprised the second-largest cluster. There was a fairly even distribution of interviews from youth trainees, university students, and students in university bridging programmes. The interviewees

TABLE 1 **THE FOUR CLUSTERS**		
Cluster name	*Maxim*	*Security/exploration characteristic*
The Hopeful Reactors	"I'm not going to end up a bum"	Security
The Passion Honers	"I'm becoming something in a secure career"	Security
The Confident Explorers	"I'm building my self for my future"	Exploration
The Anxious Seekers	"I don't know which way to turn"	Exploration

expected and sought greater personal and career challenges, and were dedicated to exploring within and beyond their current pathway option and adjusting their pathways in the direction of unfolding interests. Most saw a range of options open to them after school, and their interests often guided their decision making even when they had not been highly successful at school.

They were on average the most highly committed in the short term of all the clusters, but they did not have a clear career identity that could be mapped to a specific career. However, they did have a clear sense of purpose and made detailed plans about both their current and their anticipated future pathways. Their overall framework was generally not attached to a particular job, vocation, or profession; rather, it was attached to being a particular kind of person with a range of high-level and adaptable skills. They seemed to have grasped the idea of uncertainty through a conviction that they and their jobs would change over time and that they could prepare for this—not by guarding against change, but by embracing its challenge and stimulation. They did not manage a specific career in the sense of vocation; they managed themselves, almost as an ongoing enterprise.

The Anxious Seekers: exploring in the hope of security

The Anxious Seekers cluster was slightly smaller than the Confident Explorers cluster. The interviewees were mainly youth trainees and university bridging participants, although the group also included army personnel and a small number of university students and apprentices.

As their cluster name suggests, they were the most apprehensive and restless of the clusters and were the most dissatisfied with their current pathway option. About three-quarters of the interviews were rated highly for seriously considering, if not actually being formally committed to, a different pathway than the one currently being pursued. Sometimes these young people found that the option was not what they had expected and in some cases they had entered it fairly reluctantly in an effort to meet family expectations.

The Anxious Seekers were characterised by a pervasive sense of doubt about their lives and pathway choices. Many felt overwhelmed by the decisions they had to make or the information they needed to take into account. They were concerned about losing out—either by sticking with a pathway option that was not right for them, or by changing to another one that might

turn out to be worse. Their doubt about which choices to make meant they tended to avoid making detailed plans lest these contribute to expanding possibilities and further doubt. If one pathway did not lead to fulfilment, they tended to see this as confirmation of its unsustainability and sought something entirely different as its counterweight. Career was a process fraught with confusing change that they longed to "pin down" to a specific, recognisable job title.

The Passion Honers: securing the future

The Passion Honers made up the largest cluster, dominated by army participants and including a relatively even distribution of interviews from apprentices, university and polytechnic students, and bridging participants. It had the smallest number of interviews from youth trainees of all the clusters.

These interviewees were happy, enthusiastic, certain about their pathway choice, and pleased with the decisions they made. Few were exploring widely beyond their pathway option. Instead they were attached to a specific vocation, having often used existing or long-term interests as a springboard into a specific field or industry.

Most of the interviews in the cluster were from young people who were in options that challenged the traditional education–employment split through earning-while-learning employment and study or short-term courses with a strong vocational focus that steered them into ongoing workplace learning. Consequently, many in this cluster were employed full-time and earning National Qualification Framework credits. They were therefore engaged in career management in its most formal and traditional sense of taking opportunities (many of which were structured into their jobs) to increase skill levels within a specified field. These young people exemplified success in terms of a typical model of early career development. However, they also highlighted the complexity of career development in action through their interest in specialisation and becoming a "craftsperson", underlining that one's relationship to a career changes over time.

Rethinking security and exploration

The clusters present some interesting challenges to accepted ways of thinking about security and exploration in youth transition policy and practice. The first challenge is—and Passion

The Passion Honers were the largest cluster, dominated by army participants and including a relatively even distribution of interviews from apprentices, university and polytechnic students, and bridging participants.

> The security and exploration dimensions in the cluster stories … underscore a need to move beyond careers guidance to careers *management*, in line with the idea of *career development*, defined as assistance … throughout life, as they make education, training, and occupational choices …

Honers and Hopeful Reactors illustrate this—that security can come through either *commitment to* or *escape from* a prospective pathway. When we talk to young people about "job security" or a "secure pathway", we might need to think about the *kind* of security they are really interested in, and what their motivations are.

The Hopeful Reactors and Passion Honers had low ratings on our exploration indicators because they were not interested in, or committed to, pathways other than the one with which they were currently engaged. The Passion Honers identified with their job and strived to become people who "knew their stuff". The Hopeful Reactors saw themselves as people who could "rise above" circumstance and become achievers, respected in their families and communities. Considering the outlooks of each cluster, exploration behaviours would have been a luxury for the Hopeful Reactors and occurred only within, rather than among, pathways for the Passion Honers. Security issues in Hopeful Reactors' and Passion Honers' stories had a significance that squeezed out the inclination to consider alternative pathways or explore careers very far beyond what was immediately relevant.

The Confident Explorers and Anxious Seekers challenged some commonly accepted ways of thinking about the role of exploration in youth transition. The first challenge came through an illustration of how exploration can come from security *or* insecurity. The Confident Explorers used existing security to build a platform for further exploration—their previous achievement at school and entry into pathway options that they found interesting and challenging provided the impetus to pursue more opportunities. For them, exploration in order to find out their interests or aptitudes (perhaps through school subjects or transition programmes) was not something they did to choose a pathway, settle down, and stop exploring. Instead—and this is the second challenge—exploration was something that *emerged from* positive experiences and allowed them to *continue* expanding their options and making choices.

The Anxious Seekers, on the other hand, were driven to explore by something that looked very much like *in*security. They might gain, but they might also lose by changing pathways. Exploration was not a warm, exciting activity, but instead was riven by paralysing doubt. The third challenge suggested by their narratives is that exploring options need not be the product of a *lack* of information about possible options, but can be the result of struggling for a framework in which to *make sense of* possible options, and find *support* in order to make decisions. Finally, the Anxious Seekers illustrated that exploration could be a frightening place, prompting attempts to create security in the form of backup plans.

Understanding career *process* for career *development*

The security and exploration dimensions in the cluster stories disturb many of the ways that young people's transition is typically understood. They underscore a need to move beyond careers guidance to careers *management*, in line with the idea of *career development*, defined as assistance for people of any age and throughout life, as they make education, training, and occupational choices and manage their careers (Third International Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy, 2006). Each cluster emphasised *process*, and therefore *development*, in different ways.

The distinction between guidance, built on models of skill matching and vocational aptitudes, and management, which addresses the roles of learner and worker, is a critical one, because vocational matching approaches are increasingly difficult to sustain in today's world. Our world is one of "accelerated flows" (of people, ideas, and money) between nations (Appadurai, 1996), which the New Zealand media sometimes report as a "brain drain". It's also a world of fragmenting structures and institutions (Beck, 1999); for instance, the changes in educational institutions or the makeup of the family. We also have a rapidly changing labour market that demands different skills from workers and different kinds of connections with the education system. As the challenges people face shift away from simply securing a job once to finding jobs repeatedly throughout life (Wijers & Meijers, 1996), we need to make a parallel shift away from career advice that is tied to existing skills and aptitudes towards promoting skills for developing and managing careers, even though some of them may still be years away from emerging. Where was the Internet, for instance, 20 years ago?

Today's context underscores that "career" is no longer a structure, but a process (Wijers & Meijers, 1996). It also means that we need to think beyond knowledge for storing up towards knowledge in terms of what it can *do* (Gilbert, 2005), because the most important form of knowledge is now ontological (Barnett, 2004)—it is all about how individuals can

be in the world. This shift also means that workplaces will increasingly be seen as learning environments (Billett, 2006). Changes in the prioritising of workplace learning in New Zealand, such as the recognition of industry training organisations as tertiary education institutions, increased funding and support for industry training, apprenticeships, the Gateway programme in schools, further development of work-based literacy programmes, and the creation of union learning representatives, already suggest this.

The Confident Explorers, and to some extent the Passion Honers, already seem in step with these emerging directions in career development. However, the Confident Explorers' approach is also the most likely of all clusters to be misunderstood in relation to existing policy, because it appears to subvert accepted ideas about pathway trajectories and appropriately meaningful choices. The Confident Explorers provide perhaps the best example of the kinds of things young people could be supported to do, but it may be that those who support them—teachers, parents, employers, and policy makers—will not be comfortable with the new terms of the arrangement.

However, if we want policies to be better aligned with young people's actual priorities and needs, we need to shift our thinking, away from the idea of pathways as a simple model of transition to the labour market. We need to take account of young people's stories in new ways, especially their desires to become certain kinds of people rather than just to have certain kinds of jobs. Their stories highlight the fact that choice of career does not mean a single decision at a single point in time. We need to make sure, therefore, that we do not present careers guidance as if that were the case. The stories also highlight that there are different levels of commitment to pathway options (courses of study or training, or particular jobs), which may not be the same as commitment to a specific or designated career. Clearly, we need always to look beyond the surface when we talk to young people about their aspirations. Tracking their activities at face value is not enough, because it does not help us understand *the meaning that young people make* of those activities and the role these play in their lives. It also misleads us as to the nature of the support that would be most useful—something ongoing, but also something dynamic and creative, because career development is for a society where the roles of learner and worker continue to change. Careers are no longer a game, if they ever were. But if we want things to "play out" well for young people, we need to look at what they are doing and listen to them closely.

References

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Barnett, R. (2004). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, *23*(3), 247–260.

Beck, U. (1999). *World risk society*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers.

Billett, S. (2006). Constituting the workplace curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *38*(1), 31–48.

Career Services rapuara. (2004, February). Drive to improve tertiary decision-making. *Career Edge,* 11.

Career Services rapuara. (n.d.). *Career education: The partnership approach* (Information brochure). Wellington: Author.

Gilbert, J. (2005). *Catching the knowledge wave? The knowledge society and the future of education*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

Third International Symposium on Career Development and Public Policy. (2006). *Communique summarising key principles and action plan*. Sydney: Author.

Vaughan, K. (2003, August). *Changing lanes: Young people making sense of pathways*. Paper presented at Educating for the 21st Century: Rethinking the Educational Outcomes We Want for Young New Zealanders, the annual conference of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington.

Vaughan, K. (2005). The pathways framework meets consumer culture: Young people, careers, and commitment. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *8*(2), 173–186.

Vaughan, K., Roberts, J., & Gardiner, B. (2006). *Young people producing careers and identities. The first report from the Pathways and Prospects project*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Wijers, G., & Meijers, F. (1996). Career guidance in the knowledge society. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, *24*(2), 185–198.

Notes

1   I gratefully acknowledge my colleagues Josie Roberts, Ben Gardiner, Edith Hodgen, and Cathy Wylie for their work on the project and report.

2   All New Zealand universities run "bridging" programmes to prepare people who do not meet the academic criteria for full entry to university.

Karen Vaughan is a senior researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
Email: karen.vaughan@nzcer.org.nz