What is CTE?  
Practitioners Struggle to Define Their Field in the United States

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to capture the perspectives of 13 masters’ students, who are also practitioners in Career and Technical Education (CTE), regarding how they conceive of the field. A few recurring themes emerged: (a) transitional identity as the field tries to distance itself from the stigma of vocational education; (b) purpose of CTE reflecting the tension between narrow and broad preparation for work; and (c) perspectives on new directions in the field viewing CTE as an integral component of education for all students aligned with calls for more rigorous integration of academic and CTE. Curricular recommendations for CTE graduate programs are articulated, including implications to develop coherent and shared consensus regarding the purpose and mission of the field to provide programmatic direction and vision.

Keywords: Career and Technical Education, Curriculum Integration, Graduate Education, Trends, Vocational Education

WHAT IS CTE? PRACTITIONERS STRUGGLE TO DEFINE THEIR FIELD

The field of career and technical education (CTE) in the United States has a long and rich historical presence. Originally referred to as vocational education, the field was formally acknowledged and funded as a component of the public K-12 and higher education school system with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 in the United States (Fletcher, 2006). Historically, the purpose and mission of vocational education was to prepare students for work that required a pre-baccalaureate education. Despite the long-standing nature of the field, its very existence as a K-12 curriculum has been problematic, at times controversial, and scrutinized since its inception. This came, perhaps, from differences from the dominant, mainstream academic culture, as well as its association with social inequality by way of tracking students (Fletcher & Zirkle, 2009). Blank (1999) attributed this negative attention towards the field to the notion that CTE was a “dumping ground” for less academically-oriented students, a less challenging and rigorous curriculum, and a vehicle for equipping students with the

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knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriate for low-wage jobs. Finally, in the 1990s, the field took a new name and a new direction. In response to lingering issues in the field and new skills demands emerging in a global economy, a shift from vocational education (or specific preparation for work) to career and technical education (or preparation for broad careers) was embraced (Hernandez, Phelps, Jones, & Holub, 1995).

Today, the purpose and mission of CTE has broadened to prepare students for: (a) jobs requiring less than a baccalaureate degree, (b) equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to pursue a wide range of high-demand/wage careers, and (c) ensuring students are ready for the rigor of postsecondary studies (Fletcher & Zirkle, 2009). However, albeit the shift from vocational education to CTE, it appears practitioners, policymakers, and the general public still share some commonly-held perceptions of the past and have yet to develop a unified perspective on what CTE means and what the goals should be. In many ways, educators and employers are still trying to reconcile the extent to which the field should be about preparation for, about, or through work (Grubb, 1997).

As a by-product of the changing nature of the field, graduate programs providing professional advancement in the field have also experienced a similar struggle. For example, in response to changes in the field, programs such as home economics have changed their identity to family and consumer sciences. At the program and departmental level across the country, the shift from vocational education has resulted in such names like workforce education, workforce development, and other name variations. Unlike in counterpart European countries where practitioners and educators have steadily agreed on a relatively unified purpose for and identity as vocational education and training (VET); in the United States it appears a shared understanding of the field is still evolving (Lasonen, 2010).

A lack of a shared understanding of the field from practitioners in the United States represents an important issue for graduate programs providing professional advancement and preparing them to be stewards in the field. Compounding this problem is the lack of strategic development in graduate programs preparing the new generation of practitioners in the field. As it is generally perceived, strategic program planning and implementation in higher education are a function of tradition rather than systematic thinking based on sound conceptual frameworks. For example, Rojewski (2002) argued that beliefs and assumptions about the purpose of the field should be taken into consideration for the conceptualization of programs and related curriculum designs.

In this context, the purpose of this research study was to describe how practitioners, currently enrolled in a CTE masters program, conceive of the field in the United States. These professionals are in a unique position to their views, as they are currently engaged in an academic setting while concomitantly serving as practitioners in CTE. Therefore, the researchers were interested in their conceptions of the field as a result of being in both settings.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the midst of recent transformational developments in the field, it is important to understand how practitioners view it to inform teacher preparation and graduate education programs. Accordingly, the literature review in this manuscript discusses: (a) the evolution of the field in terms of its foci, image, and name changes; (b) the landscape of undergraduate CTE teacher preparation; and (c) CTE graduate level preparation.

From Vocational to Career and Technical Education

Historically, vocational education—as the field was originally referred to—was a pivotal force in carrying out the mission of preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to gain entry-level jobs. To meet its purpose, curricula were designed for students with a focus on entering the workforce upon graduation of
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