Factors that Inform Students' Choice of Study and Career

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Abstract

The research was conducted to find out factors that informed second cycle students' choices of programmes of study and career in the Kumasi Metropolis of Ghana. The descriptive survey was used for the study, and both questionnaire and interview guide were used in gathering the data. The questionnaire was administered on the students while the Coordinators and the heads of the selected institutions were interviewed. A total of 432 subjects was used for the study. Out of this number, 420 were students, 6 were Guidance Coordinators, and 6 were Heads of Institutions. The study revealed among other things that career guidance programme was not given prominent attention for the full benefit of students. Hence students' source of career information was limited. It was also noted that though students had some information about the self, much was not known about the world of work. Recommendations on how to improve the implementation of career guidance programmes in senior high schools so students become well informed to choose their future careers were given at the end.

Keywords: Factors; Student; Career choice; Guidance; Counselling

Introduction

Nations are transforming from traditional societies to modern technological ones and are currently experiencing very fluid changes in areas such as political, economic, industrial, social, and educational life. Such rapid changes often place considerable stress on individuals whose coping and adaptation mechanisms are disorganised when they find it difficult to accommodate these fluid changes. The aftermath is the emergence of a number of disabling social and personal problems. The family in which the child grows is not immune against these problems or changes. Parents themselves are entangled or preoccupied with their own problems thereby often leaving their wards with little or no guidance throughout the elementary school years. The child then proceeds to the secondary school very poorly prepared to cope with the stresses of the adolescent period and with those stresses inherent in studying at the secondary school level.

It can consequently not be over emphasised that there is the need to put in place a mechanism such as, guidance and counselling in every educational setting to help meet students' educational, personal-social, and vocational needs. Such guidance services assist students to take meaningful decisions and make positive adjustments in life. Hence, guidance which is a helping service aims at behavioural change toward a functional life. Within the guidance programme are the following services: appraisal, information, counselling, placement, orientation, consultation, referral and follow-up. Thus, educational changes must go beyond mere diversification of the curriculum if the changes should be a means of helping students to have integrated personality to realize their true potentials. Guidance is therefore expected to be an essential component of the educational system to facilitate students' decisions in the selection and appropriate combination of subjects or courses that best suit their aptitudes and aspirations for the future world of work. Imperatively, vocational or career guidance helps individuals to identify their own talents, strengths and weaknesses, family expectations, and national requirements in order to sort out the personal relevance of the educational and career options available. Career guidance service goes a long way to inform students' decisions about their subjects of study which obviously lead to appropriate career decisions. In sum, guidance not only caters for the academic growth of students, but also their personal and social lives, thereby satisfying the philosophy underlying their education which is creating a well balanced (intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically) individuals with the requisite knowledge, skills, values and aptitudes for self-actualization and for the socio-economic and political transformation of a nation. This research therefore sought to find out factors that are likely to inform choices of study and career of students in second cycle institutions. The researcher deems it fit to undertake this study because Ghana, in its transition from a typical traditional society to a modern technological orientation, is presently undergoing rapid changes and such changes in one way or the other can alter the needs of individuals and the country at large.

It is also a fact that students' subject preferences and career choice are highly influenced by certain factors. According to Ahuja (2002), factors that may influence career could be classified into social and structural influences and these can inform career choices positively or negatively. Social influences are biases that inform internal and external perception of individuals. Gender stereotyping, role models, peers, media, and parents are examples of social influences. Structural influences are manifested in the institutional support available such as teachers and counsellors, access to technology, and same-sex versus co-educational schools. While both social and structural factors can influence decisions about career choice, adolescents' perceptions are

mostly influenced by social factors such as parents, peers and role models, prestige and job lucrativeness. When applied to skills, interests, and career options, stereotyping about gender roles can limit opportunities for both sexes and deprive the workforce of talent (Adya & Kaiser, 2005). To minimise these influences, students at all levels of education need vocational or career orientation in order to be well informed about the world of work, as well as understanding themselves better. This will pave way to appropriate choice of career that suits an individual's interest, abilities, aptitudes, capabilities and values. The purpose of the study was to find out what factors informed or influenced students' choices of programmes of study and career.

Relevant Literature
Scope of School Guidance
Guidance is defined differently by various authors depending on their theoretical background. Oladele (2000) cited Arbuckle (1966) to have perceived guidance as a concept, an educational construct and a service. As a concept, guidance denotes the utilization of a point of view in order to help an individual. As an educational construct, it refers to the provision of an experience that helps students to understand themselves, accept themselves and live effectively in their society. In this wise, the school becomes responsible for the total personal growth and development of the child and not only for character training and intellectual development. As a service, guidance refers to procedures and processes organized to achieve a helping relationship. From the view point of Oladele (2000) guidance is seen as an "umbrella term" to refer to every activity that is aimed at protecting and guiding the development of students. It is a help given to an individual to assist him or her to take decisions, make choices and adjustments and in the solution of need situations. This then makes the recipient to grow independently and acquire the ability for self-responsibility.

For Gibson and Mitchell (1990), the basic guidance activities in the secondary schools should include pupil-appraisal, counselling, placement, follow-up, research and evaluation. Oladele (2000) notes that at the senior secondary school level, the student faces the decision of continuing his/her formal education to the university or any tertiary institution or going to work. Consequently, the scope of guidance at the senior secondary school should encompass the educational, vocational, and personal-social needs of students. Comprehensive school guidance programme is a developmental sequential and continuous programme of counselling, consultation, appraisal, information, orientation and placement services for all students from kindergarten through to the higher level of education. The programme becomes an integral part of the total educational experience, and seeks to focus attention on individual students as they strive to make useful choices based on realistic concepts of themselves and the world in which they live. Thus, for Shertzer and Stone (1976), guidance should serve the purpose of making sure that the students, the teachers and the parents understand the various phases of the individual's development and their impact on the growth, adjustment, and decision-making process.

Theories of Career Development
In choosing a career, it is important to know how students develop their preferences for one occupation or the other, and how these preferences are implemented. Parents, teachers, and counsellors ought to be familiar with major factors which influence vocational or career development of individuals. This is necessary because career theorists believe that individuals have certain abilities, interests, personality traits and other characteristics that inform one's career choice. It is thus believed by professionals that if these characteristics are known together with their potential values, and where on the job market these values can be put into appropriate uses, the individual is more likely to become a happier person, a more effective worker and a more useful citizen. In other words, knowing oneself and knowing the career opportunities existing in one's environment can help an individual make a good vocational adjustment. This then attests to the fact that self-knowledge and occupational knowledge are very important means of ensuring a relatively accurate and adequate occupational decision toward career choice (Trait-Factor Theories; Parsons, 1909; Makinde & Kayode, 1987).

Career guidance service helps the individual to know the available educational and training options and the requirements for admission to assist him or her to select an appropriate field of study. In the field of vocational/career development, Super (1957) generated a vocational development theory which is popularly referred to as Donald Super's theory of Vocational Development. He summed up career development process in a series of life-stages characteristics as those of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline stages. The stage, which is of interest to this study, is the exploration stage (age 15 – 24). According to Super, the individual at this stage begins to develop an awareness of occupations. This stage happens to be the adolescence period and teenagers recognize and accept somehow the need to make career decisions and obtain relevant information. They become aware of interests and abilities and how they are related to work opportunities. They also identify possible fields and levels of work consistent with these abilities and interests and they secure training to develop skills and advance occupational entry and or enter occupations that would fulfil their interests and abilities.

Maus (2003) explained that according to Super, when an individual makes vocational choice, he or she does so in relation to the understanding of him or herself. More so, psychologically, career choices are ''drives'' by self-concepts. What this implies is that making satisfying vocational choices requires a good understanding of self. It also follows that understanding self is the key to making a successful vocational choice. But it is also important, however, for one to know the requirements and work activities of different occupations. Super Donald believes that if knowledge of any occupation or its demand is faulty, that occupation is not going to be well evaluated in relation to one's self-concept.

Another theory of relevance is Holland's theory of vocational choice which is also referred to as Holland's Career Typology (Holland 1959 quoted in Holland 1997). This theory is grounded in what he calls modal personal orientation or a developmental process established through heredity and the individual's life history of reacting to environmental demands. This is to say that individuals are attracted to a particular occupation that meets their personal needs and provides them satisfaction.

According to Oladele (2000), Holland (1959) builds the theory on the premise that a choice of career is an expression of an individual's personality, and that members of a vocation have similar personality and common histories of personal development. Holland thus suggests that career-seeking behaviour is an outgrowth of efforts to effect and match an individual's characteristics with those of a specific occupational field. Hence, by choosing a particular occupation an individual projects into one of his preferred life-style as a result of his view of himself and that of the world of work. To Holland therefore, the congruence between individual's personality and the environment in which he works then becomes a determiner of vocational satisfaction, stability and achievement. The theory further maintains that for an occupational choice to be appropriate, the individual must have accurate self-knowledge, accurate self-evaluation and accurate occupational knowledge.

Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad and Herma's Theory (1951) also has it that "(a) occupational choice is a long–term process; (b) the process becomes increasingly irreversible; (c) the eventual choice represents a compromise between what the individual would ideally prefer and the available realistic possibility, and (d) occupational choice and eventual entry is of process consisting series of stages that the individual will go through. The three stages of the process have been entitled Fantasy (Childhood), Tentative (Early Adolescence), Realistic (Middle Adolescence) stage'' (Oladele, 2000, p. 84).

Recognizing that vocational choice is influenced by four factors, such as the reality factor, the influence factor of the educational process, the emotional factor and individual values, the theory proposes that it is a development path that leads to career choice. At the pre-adolescence years and continuing through the senior secondary school, the young person further defines the interest in, capacity for and values of an occupational choice. The cumulative effect of the process is the transition process in which the adolescent begins the career choice process, recognises the consequences and responsibilities of that choice.

The realistic stage, spanning from mid-adolescence through young adulthood, has three sub stages: exploration, crystallization and specification. In the exploration stage the adolescent begins to restrict choices based on personal likes, skills and abilities. In the crystallization stage an occupational choice is made. This is followed by specification stage where the individual pursues the educational experiences required in achieving his career goal. The implication is that realistic vocational choice emerges with age. It is also evident that occupational choice is a process, and this process is systematic and predictable, and that occupational choice culminates in an eventual decision to enter a specific occupation (Oladele, 2000).

Factors that Influence Career Development and Choice

Factors underlying career choice have become of growing interest to educators, counsellors, ministers and social scientists. Some people maintained that the individual does not exercise career choice, but that the socio-economic environment determines the vocational choices that are made. Others argue that the individual does exert a choice and that a person may make a wise and fulfilling career choice, or an unsatisfactory choice. In an attempt to understand vocational choice, it is pertinent to examine the viewpoints of sociologists, psychologists, and economists as discussed by Friesen (1981).

Sociologists stress the forces in our society as the major determinants of vocational choice. Some sociologists, according to Friesen (1981), consider the birthright of the individual as a most significant factor in career choice since it establishes the family, race, nationality, social class, residential area, and to a large extent, the educational and cultural opportunities for the person. They also argue that the range of occupation that an individual will consider in choosing a career is determined largely by the status expectations of the social class to which one belongs. Similarly, parents strongly influence their children in their choice of career. For instance, some children inherit their father's occupations, while others choose an occupation within the range acceptable to parental values, expectations and social class. Furthermore, educational opportunities clearly influence vocational choice. For example, students who drop out of high/secondary school restrict their occupational choice to manual work or in many cases to insecure white-collar jobs, or the semi-skilled and unskilled services or clerical occupations.

Also, according to Friesen, the psychologist in comparison to the sociologist is interested in the inner world of the individual and the role personality plays in vocational choice. The psychologist believes that the career a person chooses is an expression of the personality of life style of the individual. Thus, personality theory is particularly important in vocational counselling. The trait theory has the assumption that people differ in their requirements. Thus, what counselling does is an attempt to match traits with jobs.

The structural theorists are personality theorists who view human personality as a structured whole with distinctive attributes. These attributes are organised in a unique manner and are characteristic of the individual. For instance:

> The psychoanalytic theorists view vocational choice as an expression of the personality of the individual. Such concepts as identification, sublimation and unconscious drives can be used to explain vocational choice.

> Self-concept theorists assume that vocational choice is an attempt by the person to implement his or her self-concept. It is argued by self-concept theorists that in the job as well as in life generally, the person attempts to express his sense of who he is. An individual attempts to live out in his job his values, hopes, dreams and aspirations. The degree to which he can express who he is, is related to the degree of job satisfaction a person obtains from his or her job. If the job is congruent with his conception of who he is as a person, the individual will have a high job satisfaction. On the other hand, if the job involves activities which are inconsistent with his sense of self, the person will have low job satisfaction.

> The Needs theorists propose that personal needs, whether at conscious or unconscious level, are the major determinants of vocational choice. The need hierarchy theory of Maslow is therefore of particular interest to vocational counsellors (Friesen, 1981, 10. (4). 22-25).

The economists however believe that opportunities of the labour market strongly influence the choice people make. If the opportunities for making a living are limited, the person will seek out a career that has a potential to meet his physical needs even though the career is in many ways, unsuitable for him or her. To assist in broadening the range of career opportunities, vocational information is often very useful (Friesen, 1981).

Empirical Review

Within the realm of conventional education in Japan, there had been a prolonged tendency to stress the importance of career guidance approach. Under this approach, students make their choices based on academic standards of test deviation values and scholastic ability, rather than emphasizing their interests or individuality. The result has been a lack of awareness regarding the relevance of encouraging self-understanding and a firm grasp of occupational matters (Muroyama, n.d).

As a result of increasing emphasis on postsecondary education, researchers and educators have investigated the factors affecting educational aspirations as well as how to intervene in ways which increase educational attainment – particularly among under-represented groups According to Dai, Mau and Bikos (2000), much of this research has focused on high school students, who most obviously engaged in the career decision making process and whose personal, academic, and demographic characteristics are assumed to be the most significant predictions of eventual educational attainment.

In another development, the High School Liaison Officer of University of Regina conducted a study (unpublished study, 1987) to determine which persons had influenced first year university students to enrol at the University of Regina. The results showed that respondents indicated that of a list of 11 individuals, parents placed first, second or third as the most influential on their choices of enrolling at the University of Regina. Friends were second most influential. This study shows that although families are changing in nature, they were still clearly the most important sources of external influence on graduates' (students') educational and occupational decisions.

The Study
Design
The study was a descriptive survey. A survey design provides a quantitative description of some fraction of the population, that is, the sample through the data collection process of asking questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1995). This method was applied in the collection of data from the field in order to answer research questions concerning factors that inform students' choice of study and career choice in the Senior Secondary Schools. The data collected enabled the researcher to generalize the findings from the sample of responses to the population. The descriptive survey was chosen for the study for the fact that it determines the status of a given phenomenon as contended by Osuala (2001). The design is also highly regarded by policy makers in educational research, as data gathered by way of descriptive survey represents field conditions. The study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. The instruments for the data collection comprised of questionnaire for students and interview schedule for school administrators, counsellors and 12 selected students.

Participants of the study

The target population for the study was all the 3,221 final year students in all public senior secondary schools in the Kumasi Metropolis, the school administrators and the guidance coordinators/counsellors of the schools. The schools comprised all-female schools (70), all-male schools (70), and mixed schools (70). There were also six (6) school administrators, and six (6) guidance coordinators/counsellors. The final year students were used for the study because they were at the terminal point of a level of education and were about to further their studies or to enter the world of work, and were therefore more likely to be considering the kind of jobs they would enter after school, or educational pursuits. A Total of 432 participants were used for the study, comprising 420 students, six school administrators and six guidance coordinators/counsellors. A statistical random sampling strategy was used to select the sample. First, two schools were randomly selected from each of the sub-groups of the population. Second, 70 students were randomly selected from each of the selected schools. Third, two students were randomly selected from the 70 students of each selected schools and interviewed. Finally, all the school administrators and the guidance coordinators/counsellors of each selected school were also selected for the study. The views were sought to verify students' responses. This was to triangulate the responses especially with the qualitative data.

Data Analysis

The data obtained was analysed using the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics (mean and percentages) was used to analyze the research questions. The data was coded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows Version 11.0 Software. The data were in frequency tables and percentage. The interview responses were transcribed and analysed, using the thematic approach.

Results

The students were asked to indicate factors that influenced the selection of the subjects or courses they were pursuing. Table 1 represent the frequency distribution of the responses.

Table 1: Factors that Influenced Students' Subject of Study and Career (valid no. = 418)

Factor	Frequency	Percent
My parent / guardian	157	37.6
Counsellor / Coordinator	15	3.6
My class teacher	31	7.4
No one / self	199	47.6
Others	16	3.8
Total	418	100.0

From Table 1, 199 (47.6%) respondents selected 'no one / self', 157 (37.6%) respondents selected 'parents /guardian', 31 (7.4%) respondents selected 'class teacher', 16 (3.8%) respondents selected 'others', while 15 (3.6%) respondents selected 'counsellor /coordinators', as factors that influenced the selection of the subjects or courses they were reading.

Students were asked to indicate the most influential person n their career aspirations. Table 2 present the most influential figure on students' career aspirations.

Table 2: Most Influential Figure on Students' Career Aspirations (Valid no. = 414)

Factor	Frequency	Percent
My mother	118	28.5
My father	182	44.0
My class teacher	41	9.9
Counsellor / Coordinator	48	11.6
Others	25	6.0
Total	414	100.0

For the most influential figure on students' career aspiration as presented in Table 2, the results showed that 182 (43.5%) respondents indicated 'father',118 (28.2%) respondents indicated 'mother', 48 (11.6%) respondents indicated 'counsellor/counsellor', 41 (9.8%) respondents indicated 'class teacher', 25 (6.0%) respondents indicated 'others',

To obtain information on the influential person on students' career choice, the researcher raised that issue again at the interview session. It was found out that most of the students interviewed seemed to be pursuing their own career choices. However, a few seemed uncertain and were therefore thinking of what career to pursue. Others had accepted what their parents and others had chosen for them, and as one put it, '*we are managing*'. Here are some comments from the students:

'*I want to be in medicine so I have decided to do science, and yes, I'm doing well*'.

'*I am doing Home Economics but I will like to be a nurse in future. Madam, you see, now there is money there*'.

'Well, I have not decided on the work I will like to do. I'm still thinking about that…hmm… I will do that when I finish University'.

'My father said I should read business because he wants me to be an accountant one day. I like that so I'm trying my best'.

Since there are several factors apart from human that can in one way or the other inform career decision-making, the researcher through the interview touched on a host of others such as, subject combination, guidance coordinator's workload, and G.E.S' contribution as well as that of the schools themselves. It should also be noted here that students came to the senior secondary school with programme of study already chosen. However, the schools were doing their best to assist students cope with the programmes they had chosen. Participants had these to say:

'Students come to the second cycle institution with already chosen programmes of study and as to whether their decisions were independent, is still a question to be answered'. (Administrator)

'Now students come with already selected programmes. All we do is to organise a one week orientation programme and vividly tell them the subject combinations for the various programmes and their career opportunities'. (Coordinator)

'Concerning career guidance, that comes up most when students finish and are filling their forms for the University. It is there and then that they come for assistance a lot'. (Coordinator)

Conclusion

Career information should not just be limited to how best to study, pass examinations, and enter the appropriate institutions, but it should cover areas such as job requirement, benefits, prospects, and even job hazards and everything that ought to be known about career and the world of work. This awareness will go a long way to appropriately inform students' career choices since limited career information negatively affects individuals' career decisions and their entire life. Students tend to highly rely on external factors rather than knowing who they are and what they are capable of doing in respect to choice of study and career, if their exposure to knowledge about the world of work is inadequate, they cannot relate their capabilities to their occupational choices. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to note in this study that majority of students were pursuing their desired choices of programme of study. This at least gives the impression that these adolescents know what is good for them. However, one cannot be silent on those who admitted that their choices were informed by parents, siblings, teachers or others. Since one cannot totally rule out the possibility of these factors from influencing students' choices, career guidance providers should find ways of involving them in the career guidance activities of students. This will in a way help educate everyone when it comes to individuals and career decisions.

Recommendations

Mature decision-making is the process of exploring different alternatives. Therefore, career service providers should assist students by availing to them a wider source of career information to help them explore different alternatives. Since the study has also identified that families appear to play a critical role in students' career aspirations, the family should be involved in the implementation of career guidance programmes in the schools. It must also be noted that career guidance programme at the Junior High school level is of necessity if students are to be educated about the world of work and related programme of study before they proceed to the Senior high School..

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