

UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

**THE ZIMBABWE BULLETIN
OF TEACHER EDUCATION**

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

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The Zimbabwe Bulletin of Teacher Education

Volume 9 No 1 MARCH 2000

ISSN NO-1022-3800

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Factors in the Career Choices of Zimbabwean Sixth Form Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the factors that influence career choices of Sixth form students in Zimbabwe. The study considers factors such as family influence, peer pressure and school influence in making career choices. Although results do not show much difference in responses between male and female students, there are cases where marked differences are so obvious. For example, males feel they can make their career choices independent of their parents while females on the other hand rely on parents for career support. The study also shows that salary is a major issue to consider. Males consider salary to be very important in choosing an occupation and females consider job status in society as most important.

Introduction

The issue of career choices in a changing economic environment is receiving much attention in Zimbabwe. Career choice is a complex process which involves both subjective issues related to identity as individuals as well as economic issues. In Zimbabwe, much emphasis is being put on good subject combinations at Sixth form. For example, Maths and Commercial subjects are favourably considered for onward transition to University and eventually to the job market.

As a result, a lot of emphasis has been put on the popular subjects like Maths, Science, English, Management of Business e.t.c. without much guidance in choosing marketable careers. This study investigated factors that influence the career choices of Sixth form students.

Background to the Study

This study was carried out following experiences, discussions and debates among friends about the Sixth form students' ability to make reasonable and independent career choices. Our assumptions were that girls, in particular, were at a disadvantage because they are viewed by folk wisdom as weak and incapable of making wise decisions on their own. There was also an assumption that female students would not have much of a wide choice but had to select from and go along with the traditionally assigned careers like nursing, teaching and others (Duncan 1989; Kelly, 1981; Gordon 1995). The other assumptions were that:

- there are various factors that influence career choices (e.g. gender, socialization);
- the role of significant others is important in choosing a career (e.g. family, peers, teachers) and
- the present experiences of students, (e.g. learning environment) play a major role in career choices.

It is our belief that the student's experiences about the future are partly a function of social background and experience with peers in the school. For example, parental beliefs on what is an appropriate career for women and men is transmitted during primary socialization and then in schools, (Duncan, 1989; Davison and Kanyuki, 1992).

The Objectives of the Study

The study investigated the ability of Sixth form students in making independent career choices. The study addressed the following questions:

- What do students need to know as they consider educational careers?
- What factors influence career choices?

Among some of the factors influencing career choice could be the family influence, peer pressure or school influence.

It is our strong belief that the factors are a force to reckon with, when it comes to future career choices of young people. The above factors influence an individual in one way or the other. For example, the family influence starts at a very tender age until the child goes to school and meets peers of the same age group.

What is Career Education?

Career education is interpreted by many people to simply mean occupational programmes usually in vocational subjects such as Home Economics, Industrial Education and Business Education. However, Mwamwenda (1995) asserts that career education should assist the student as a whole. In other words, the career counsellor can assist students to deal with problems encountered at personal social, vocational and educational levels. According to Hoyt et al, (1972), Career Education is: the total effort of public education and community aimed at helping all individuals, to become familiar with the work values of a work oriented society, to integrate these values into their personal value system, and to implement these values into their personal lives in such a way that work becomes possible, meaningful, and satisfying to each individual.

Hoyt et al emphasize several aspects of Career Education such as public education, that is, government sponsored education, the community as a source of curriculum, planning, advising and supplying work experience in high schools to prepare students for future career jobs. Referring to "guided education", (career education) Dean (1990) defines school counselling and guidance, of which career counselling is part, as: an entity of activities of a different nature, which are aimed at the school and its pupils, with the purpose of helping the pupils to get the maximum out of the school.

According to Nugent (1990:138): career counselling occurs in a professional relationship when a counsellor helps individuals and groups explore decisions or resolve problems about career choice and career establishment in schools, in the community, or in the workplace.

Brown (1985:197) sees career counselling as: the process of helping an individual select and prepare to enter and function effectively in an occupation.

In the definitions above, the emphasis is on the institution helping and guiding pupils/students in preparing for an effective and rewarding future career. The definitions also indicate that career counselling is very important in directing students to better career choices. Options are laid down for students to make reasonable choices based on their abilities. Schools in Zimbabwe should have such career counselling programmes in order to assist all students prepare for an effective future. According to Samkange (1985), every child should receive some form of guidance and counselling. If such a programme is not offered at secondary school, students may develop very unrealistic ambitions and also may become discontented members of society. For example, most male students who responded to the questionnaire believe that most paying jobs are ideal for them despite their abilities.

Participants and Instruments

A sample of 17 Sixth form schools were randomly selected for the study. Schools selected are located in each of the 9 regions of Zimbabwe. In all, 878 lower and upper sixth form students participated in the study. 370 (42%) females and 508 (58%) males took part.

A questionnaire was sent to all schools. The one sheet questionnaire had seventeen (17) questions for the students. The results are discussed under males and females. From the total number of the sample, females were way less than the males and the results may not give a true picture of their views.

Results and Discussion

Zimbabwean sixth form students showed high occupational aspirations when asked to indicate what work they hoped to do as adults. As Table 1 shows, more males opt for high paying jobs such as commercial subjects, engineering, and medicine than females.

Table 1: Occupational Aspirations

COMMERCIAL	ENGINEERING	EDUCATION	HEALTH	ARMED FORCES
Males 5 1.3%	Males 51%	Males 94.6%	Males 62.6%	Males 100%
Females 48.7%	Females 49%	Females 54%	Females 37.4%	Females 0%
Total 100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Statistics in Table 1, show that there was little difference between males and females in preference for commercial and engineering. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, education had more males opting for it. Perhaps the number of girls responding to this question was small. We always assumed that education is associated with nurturing and caring for others rather than the other occupations. Naturally, we assumed that more female students would opt for education. Studies elsewhere by Duncan (1989) and Kelly (1981) show that occupations typed as feminine are associated with nurturing and caring for others and with routine clerical work rather than management and decision making.

When asked to respond to a set of the following questions, there were glaring differences between males and females.

- a) Do you intend going to University?
- b) Which University and what programme?

Fifty nine point nine percent (59.9%) male students and forty point one percent (40.1%) female students indicated they would go to the University. The majority of them were not sure which University, 63.6% female students were not sure as compared to 36.4% male students. 65% of male students were sure that they would go to foreign universities and 35% females were sure they would go to foreign universities.

What vocations would you enter?.

Table 2: Vocation

COMMERCIAL	ENGINEERING	EDUCATION	HEALTH	ARMED FORCES
Males 58.2%	Males 62.7%	Males 64.3%	Males 58.8%	Males 43.5%
Females 41.8%	Females 37.3%	Females 35.7%	Females 41.2%	Females 56.5%
Total 100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The difference was very clear. More female participants opted for the traditionally gender typed occupations. This trend among female students suggests that they are socialized toward certain careers. Studies elsewhere in both western and other African societies; Wolpe, (1981) Davison and Kanyuka (1992) seem to suggest that thoughts of suitable occupations for girls are transmitted during socialisation. Studies have shown that factors such as a belief about appropriate and inappropriate activities for women and men have been emphasized during socialization, (Duncan, 1989, Kelly 1981), and this has influenced the career choices made by male and female students.

When the participants were asked why they liked the chosen career, the answers ranged from; "You get to meet different people with different kinds of problems all of which one can deal with very easily, we also like this career (medicine and surgery) because it is a test of both mental and spiritual endurance" (male respondent) to "Zimbabwe needs more health specialists (Physiotherapy) to care for the growing populations (female respondent).

The authors believed that young people, if given a choice prefer to work in urban settings where there are better facilities and resources. When asked to indicate their preferences for workplace between urban and rural settings, a sizeable number of males (42.9%) preferred rural as opposed to 57.1% preferring urban settings. Among the female respondents, 57.1% preferred rural as opposed to 42.9% who preferred urban settings. The statistics in a way punctured the belief that all young people prefer working in urban settings.

Table 3: Salary and Career Choice by Zimbabwean Sixth Form Students.

\$ 0-1000	\$1000-2500	\$2501-7000	\$7001-10000	Above \$10000
Males 23.1%	Males 32.3%	Males 60%	Males 69.2%	Males 65.3%
Females 76.9%	Females 67.7%	Females 40%	Females 30.8%	Females 37.7%
Total 100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Results from Table 3 confirm beliefs that prestige and money are major determining factors among male respondents but completely the opposite among female respondents. Perhaps this trend of thought is largely determined by the economic situation prevailing in Zimbabwe. In addition, socialisation among the Africans emphasizes that males are the bread winners and therefore should get more money.

Career Choice And Significant Others

Table 4: Career advice received from Parents and Significant Others.

	Male	Female
Yes	55.2%	44.8%
No	62.1%	37.9%

It is interesting to note that slightly more male than female respondents believe they can make their career choices independent of their parents.

What this may mean is that young people are becoming aware of their rights in deciding on career choices. It could also reflect the fact that parents may have a lower level of formal education and are seen as not competent to advise on careers.

Table 5: Career advice (Teachers)

	Male	Female
Yes	51.2%	62%
No	48.8%	38%

Again, Table 5 confirms that females still rely on significant others on career choices. This study contradicts a study by Breton (1972), in Canada among high school students. His study found out that male students put into consideration evaluation of parents and school faculty members. According to Brenton (1972:25) the school is relatively speaking, fitted to the socioeconomic structure and serves as a mechanism of vertical and horizontal allocation of young people into the occupational grid.

When asked if both the teachers and parents were happy with their career choices, female respondents (80.6%) reported that parents were happy with their choices. 39.4% male respondents said their parents were happy with their decision. But a substantial percentage (43%) of male students have indicated that their parents were not happy with their choices. For the teachers, there is significant difference between male and female respondents. The majority of the males felt teachers were not happy with their choices and the majority of females felt teachers were happy with their choices. Alexander et al, (1975) suggest that aspirations were found to be influenced by parental expectations.

This is confirmed by this study for female respondents. The respondents were asked to rank the aspects already dealt with in the questionnaire. The results were as follows:

Table 6 : Aspects for consideration in Career Choice among Sixth Formers

Salary	Job status in society	Travel opportunity	National demand in area	Rural/urban set up
Male 86.5%	Male 42.6%	Male 56.3%	Male 73.3%	Male 62.7%
Female 13.5%	Female 57.4%	Female 43.7%	Female 26.7%	Female 37.3%
100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

From the figures above, male respondents (86.5%) believe very strongly that salary is very important followed by national demand (73.3%) in the area. This may suggest a lot of patriotism on the part of male students. It may also suggest that they believe they are 'natural' bread winners and need to earn more or it could also reflect chauvinism. On the other hand, female respondents (57.4%) rank job status in society as the most important in choosing a career. The difference in addressing the above issue by both respondents suggests a different perception in orientation both at home and school.

Conclusions And Recommendations

The process of occupational choice among Sixth form students involves a set of compromises. According to Ginzeberg (1952), "an individual tries to choose a career in which one can make as much as possible to own interests and capacities". But in seeking an appropriate choice, one must weigh opportunities and the limitations of the environment. Ginzberg suggests that the process may not be reversible, but leaves room for exceptions.

This study was set up to investigate the factors that affect career choices among sixth form students. The results show that male students feel more independent in choosing careers than the female students. It seems that students lack guidance in choosing suitable careers. At the time of this research not many schools had counselling programmes organized.

In the light of the discussions in this paper, there is need for all schools and school boards to organise programmes to assist students in making better career choices.

This can be done through schools providing experiences that prepare children for better living rather than for more schooling. As Balch (1989:341) asserts: state and local schools boards, administrators and teachers must stress practical hands on activities that could be used by the future workforce. Efforts must be extended to reduce the percentage of class time devoted to memorization and recall and to increase the instructional time for activities that encourage higher thinking skills; decision making strategies and problem solving dilemmas.

A curriculum that allows students to experience and make practical career choices will help to channel relevant skills for future jobs. Schools can organize career days whereby industry people visit schools and address students on careers on the market and their academic requirements.

Career education programmes must be vigorously introduced in all institutions of learning, especially in High Schools, so that students are channelled into occupations available in the country and suitable for their individual abilities and aptitudes.

Further studies, with a more representative sample, may be necessary.

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