

High School Students' Perceptions of Career Guidance and Development Programmes for University Access

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KEYWORDS Career Development. Qualitative. Cognitive Information Processing. South Africa

ABSTRACT This paper investigated the current situation regarding the efficacy of career counseling and guidance programmes among high school learners in the Eastern Cape using their perceptions and lived experiences. A qualitative approach was used. A convenience sample comprising 50 participants (learners) was used in this study. Data were solicited using a Questaview distributed to the participants on the last day of a training day on career guidance which was part of the university's community outreach programme. Data were thematically analysed. The study found that participants were satisfied with the current career guidance initiatives though the efficacy could not be quantified. The paper implores researchers to adopt qualitative approaches in compiling career-counseling data from societies with diverse populations such as South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The need to widen career guidance interventions in educational settings is an international phenomenon (Plant 2004; Du Toit 2005; Bernes et al. 2007). Reasons for this trend are rooted in the perceived economic and social benefits of such interventions (Plant 2004). Research indicates that, lack of career guidance access in more diverse populations (Du Toit 2005; Bernes et al. 2007), poor academic preparation or under-preparedness (van Schalkwyk 2007) and lack of career guidance in high school constitute a major problem for post-secondary institutions (Stern 2003; van Schalkwyk 2007). University first year class attendance rates are poor and are characterised by seemingly uncommitted students (van Schalkwyk 2007) a manifestation of poor preparation and guidance particularly in South Africa. Stern (2003) posited that forty percent of students in four-year degree institutions take some remedial education as do 63 percent in two-year institutions. Academic success and the student's initial choice of discipline (Wight and Maree 2007) are important determinants in one's propensity to dropping out of a programme. Hence inadequate or lack of career development programmes is one of the

issues concerning the difficulties in transitioning from high school to an institution of higher learning. Less informed and less qualified students drop-out more frequently (Wight and Maree 2007) than the more informed ones. It is imperative, therefore, that universities guide and advise high school learners of the post-secondary entry requirements and life ahead.

In the South African context, career choices for many high school students are accidental, rush decisions, imposed by external forces or by circumstances. Yet optimal career choices should be a result of a continuous process of conscious decision, self-discovery and aligned to the world of work. Research studies have traced the poor throughput and graduation rates in some institutions of higher learning to underprepared and uninformed students normally from poor socio-economic environments (van Schalkwyk 2007; Makura et al. 2011). One of the challenges that shape student access and retention at Universities is the provision of proper policy enablers (du Toit 2005) and career guidance and development programmes at high school level in order to prepare learners for higher education (Lucas 1993; Bernes et al. 2007). Hence the need to interrogate career guidance and counseling programmes in high schools.

The University of Fort Hare, in partnership with the South Africa-Norway Tertiary Education Development Project (SANTED 2), embarked on an outreach project to assist schools in the Eastern Cape with Career Guidance and Development. Ten pilot schools were identified

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in 2006; five in Alice and five in East London with the project running for three years. SANTED 2 project aimed at addressing and improving access and retention in order to enhance student success and curb the high attrition rates of students within the institution (Rod Bally cited in Twalo 1997). However, the programme did not materialise in 2006 due to limited budget allocation and staff shortages; hence these activities were moved to 2007.

In the past century, careers tended to follow a more or less stable pattern and many people pursued the same career for an entire life (Plant 2004; Sweet 2004). The pattern has changed in the 21st century. The world of work is unpredictable and requires flexible proactive approaches that focus not on career choices and development but on the process and efficacy of career choices (Bernes et al. 2007). New careers are constantly emerging and some are undergoing change. It is against this background that the Student Counseling Unit at Fort Hare University under the auspices of SANTED SAKHA NGETHEMBA PROJECT decided to develop, drive, facilitate and implement school career guidance programme for high schools in the Eastern Cape. The project was a pilot and had adopted a holistic approach model, focusing on career development. The project had three phases. Phase one, was training the trainer and phase two involved the implementation stage where previously trained participants, comprising learners and life orientation teachers would implement the programme in their respective schools. Phase three, was the evaluation of the programme. It was against this background that this paper investigated the current situation regarding the efficacy of career counseling and guidance programmes among high school learners in the Eastern Cape using their perceptions and lived experiences under the aegis of the University of Fort Hare.

Career Development: Background Information

According to Angels (1994: 2) in Zunker (2002) career development is defined as “the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total life span of any given individual”. It reflects individually devel-

oped needs and goals associated with stages of life and with tasks that affect career choices and subsequent fulfillment of purpose. Some current literature on career development (Zunker 2002; Stern 2003; Plant 2004; du Toit 2005; Bernes et al. 2007;) suggest that the career counseling movement is at crossroads, the movement is increasingly challenged to meet the needs of a society that is experiencing vast changes in the workplace and that is rapidly becoming more diverse (Zunker 2002).

The life of a typical high school learner is one full of uncertainty and turmoil, it is a time of increasing stress with influences of accountability from high stakes test taking to pressure from their peers. It is also a period of life changing transition that can wreak havoc on the learners’ abilities to make informed decisions for the welfare of themselves and others. High school learners are often looking for a place to belong. As a result, they rely heavily on their peer groups to learn what types of behaviours are rewarded with reactions they feel to be positive, often at the expense of reason and good judgement (Zunker 2002).

In the early 1950s, according to Zunker (2002), Super (1957), Ginsberg et al. (1951), and Roe (1956) are said to have published a career development and occupational choice theories that have become landmarks in the career guidance movement. These theories have led to numerous research projects and subsequent methods for delivering career guidance programmes. Theoretical perspectives on career development also contributed a great deal to career guidance programmes by providing insights into developmental stages and tasks associated with transition between stages, identification of personality types and corresponding work environments, and decision making techniques (Zunker 2002). Furthermore, these theories also provided special insights into career development of women, ethnic minorities, and other groups, and clarified aspects of social learning theory and its relationship to career development. Interest in career development theories continues to expand and generated lots of data and new theories of career development continue to emerge.

Career Guidance in Schools

The diversity that characterise students entering higher education is multilayered and com-

plex (van Schalkwyk 2007). Career guidance programmes should aim at developing important skills for life and work and, to assist with immediate decisions. If this is true, first, career guidance programmes must adopt a learning centered approach and this means building career education into the curriculum. In some countries, career education is neither mandatory nor included in the curriculum however; it is included in curriculum frameworks as an optional element. Where it is included in the curriculum, the way in which it is delivered, for example, as a separate subject or integrated into other subjects, the time devoted to it, and the school grades in which it is delivered, can vary widely from school to school within a country as well as between countries.

Secondly, schools must adopt a developmental approach, tailoring the content of career education and guidance to the learners' developmental stages. Incidentally, some universities have in place, support mechanisms such as mentoring, tutoring, academic literacy to support the underprepared student (van Schalkwyk 2007; Makura et al. 2011). Thirdly, schools need to adopt a more learner-centered approach through, for example, incorporating learning from and reflecting upon experience, self-directed learning methods, and learning from significant others such as parents, alumni students and employers. Schools must also incorporate a universal approach with career education and guidance forming part of the education of all learners not just those in particular types of school or programme (Euvrard 1996).

Career guidance programmes ought to be designed and implemented to meet the needs of the learners and society. Furthermore, the guidance programme should operate in a preventative way and attempt to equip learners with information, skills and attitudes so that they can successfully negotiate challenges of adolescence (Euvrard 1996).

Research also shows that 70% of learners that have received career guidance in high school all intend to enter higher education (Euvrard 1996). This means that career guidance in whatever form has a positive effect on intention to enter higher education. This has implications for the Department of Education, the department has to increase its support for career guidance initiatives in schools particularly when learners are not in a position or feel themselves un-

able to discuss their future with parents, teachers or guardians. This would involve not merely to improve the quality of career guidance in those previously disadvantaged schools which offer career guidance, but establishing the service in schools which has no such tradition.

Problems in Career Development among the Youth

According to developmental theorists, career development goes awry when individuals fail to keep pace with the demands of their culture or their age mates (Osipow 1968). Several behaviours must develop in order for mature career behaviour to occur. According to Ginzberg et al. (1951) cited in Osipow (1968) the ability to perform reality testing task, the development of a mature time perspective, the ability to delay the gratification of desires, the ability to compromise, and the ability to identify with appropriate adult models are all important. These authors further state that career indecision will be inadequate if these abilities fail to develop during adolescent stage and the individual will continue to be employed in a career in which he's dissatisfied or will engage in numerous unsatisfying occupational pursuits. The authors agreed that if the psychological development of the individual fails to progress adequately, career development will not progress smoothly however, many theories failed to show how career development can become misdirected in theoretical terms (Osipow 1968). In general, problems of maturation are related to the proper performance of the vocational developmental tasks required at a given age level.

Theoretical Framework

In order to comprehend the theoretical underpinnings of career development among students, it is important that we outline some useful perspectives. These perspectives inform not only the current study, but also the theory as well as the practices in career counseling and development. The works of Zunker (2002) was identified as most useful in this regard.

Cognitive Information Processing Perspective (CIP)

Cognitive information processing perspective (CIP) views career development in terms of how

individuals make a career decision, use information in career problem solving and decision making as well as improve the design and delivery services for individuals in educational settings (Zunker 2002; Sampson et al. 2010). According to this approach, the major strategy of career intervention is to provide learning events that will develop the individual's processing abilities. Zunker (2002) further stresses that clients develop capabilities as career problem solvers to meet immediate as well as future career problems. As such, information-processing stages begin with the screening of information, translating and encoding input in short term memory; then information get stored in the long-term memory and later activating, retrieving, and transforming the input into a working memory to arrive at a solution. The advocates of this theory believe that career problem solving is primarily a cognitive process that can be improved through generic processing skills such as communication, analysis, synthesis, and execution. This approach emphasizes the notion that career information counseling is a learning event. CIP recognizes the role of cognition as a mediating force that leads individuals to greater power and control in determining their own destinies (Zunker 2002).

Social Cognitive Approach

According to the proponents of this theory, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1996) in Zunker (2002), "there are three ways to translate and share knowledge with existing theories and emerging ones". The first way is to agree on a common meaning for conceptually related concepts such as self-concept and self-efficacy. Secondly, to translate and share knowledge about the existing theories and emerging ones is to fully describe and define common outcomes such as satisfaction and stability found in a number of theories and thirdly, is to fully explain the relationship among such diverse constructs such as interest, self-efficacy, abilities and needs.

The fundamental assumptions of this theory are embedded in Bandura's social cognitive theory, which blends cognitive, self-regulatory and motivational processes into a lifelong phenomenon. It seeks to establish methods of defining specific mediators from which learning experiences shape and subsequently influence career behaviour (Zunker 2002). The aim is to

explain how variables (interests, values, abilities) interrelate and how all these variables influence individual growth and the contextual factors (environmental influences) that lead to career outcomes. Social Cognitive Approach conceptualises the interacting influences among individuals; their behaviour, and environments to describe how individuals influence situations that ultimately affect their own thoughts and behaviour (Zunker 2002).

Research Questions

The study aimed at unraveling the following questions

1. What is the efficacy of the Career Development Programme coordinated by the University of Hare among High School Learners in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa?
2. What are the implications for tertiary education access?

Study Aim and Objective

The overall aim of this project was to establish the perceived impact of a Career Development Programme among High School learners and its implications for tertiary education access. The major objective of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceived impact of career guidance and development programmes among high school learners and its implication for tertiary education access. Such a study would highlight and promote career guidance activities in some Eastern Cape schools in order to prepare learners therein for higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design (Berg 1995; Khuzwayo and Chikoko 2009). It was, thus informed or guided by the interpretive research paradigm. The Interpretive research framework of research thinking stresses the quality of data to be collected (Henning 2005; Chikoko and Khuzwayo 2009). This entails a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the story or words articulated by a respondent. Although the experience of a ca-

reer guidance programme is an individual matter for each learner and quantitative data may indicate the shift regarding their thoughts and feelings before and after the programme was implemented, they do not contribute to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the subject matter from the individual's experience, as qualitative studies do.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The study sample consisted of 50 participants who had participated in a SANTED funded Career Development Programme workshop organised and facilitated by the University of Fort Hare's Student Counseling Unit. Ten schools from Alice and East London areas and their environs had sent delegates to the workshop. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the participants. Five students per school consented to participating in the data gathering exercise. The total sample comprised 50 respondents. This figure was arrived at by employing the proportional quota sampling procedure. In proportional quota sampling you want to represent the major characteristics of the population by sampling a proportional amount of each. In line with this sampling design, five completed questionnaires were randomly selected from each participating school for analysis. This meant that the participants were selected on the basis of their typicality, location and accessibility. In this way, the sample was based on specific needs (Cohen and Manion 2000). This is a non-probability sampling design.

Instrument

A three-segment structured interview schedule or Questaview with a mixture of closed and open-ended questions was used to collect data from the participants. It was administered after the purpose and rationale of the study was explained to them. The instrument was developed by the researchers and was administered after it was piloted to students who would not take part in the study in order to improve its reliability and the validity. The instrument was then circulated to knowledgeable researchers who are specialists in career guidance issues and student counsellors for their comments. The participants were asked to reflect, through narratives, on how they experienced the training sessions as regards

their thoughts and feelings on the efficacy of the career guidance interventions before and after the workshop.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected from a willing captive audience at the end of a career development workshop alluded to earlier on as part of the workshop evaluation process. The participants' inform consent to willingly partake in the exercise was sought. The exercise lasted forty-five minutes, as the participants were required to write a narrative of their feelings and observations on the Questaview.

Data Analysis

The thematic method of data analysis was employed. Thematic Analysis is an approach used to dealing with data that involves the creation and application of 'codes' to data (Piantanida and Garman 1999). This was done after the researchers had studied the content of the responses in depth. This approach rests on the premise that "knowledge is constructed not only by observable phenomena, but also by descriptions of people's imitations, beliefs, values and reasons, meaning making and self-understanding" (Henning et al. 2005:20).

RESULTS

Eight major categories emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses and these categories were used as a framework to present the findings. Each category is discussed with relevant quotations from the participants. Themes emerged when the participants were asked about their thoughts and feelings (perceptions of the impact) before undergoing the training include the following:

Scared

This was one of the dominant themes that emerged from the data. Thirty or 60% of the respondents indicated that they were much scared when they were chosen by their life orientation teachers to participate in the career development programme. One participant indicated: "I felt very scared when my teacher told me that I'm going to participate in the career

development programme because I did not know what to expect.”

Nervous

This category also emerged from the participants’ description of their feelings before undergoing the training. This was coupled with feelings of anxiety about the programme and what is expected of them as participants. One of the participants stated:

“I felt very nervous but it comes naturally as I’m a shy person.” Some participants felt nervous initially however, they expressed feelings of excitement, as soon they understood what the programme was all about. The following statement supports this argument:

“I was a bit nervous about what we were going to do but got excited when I knew what the programme offers”.

Anxious

Most of the participants expressed feelings of anxiousness because they did not know anything about the programme. However, this feeling would subside as the programme is presented and the participants were encouraged to fully participate. One participant said:

“I felt anxious and yet eager to find out how it would help me.” One participant decided not to attend the first meeting that was called by the teachers at school because she was very anxious and did not know what to expect. The following statement supports this argument:

“I was not interested, in fact I did not go to the first meeting but after my peer told me about it I changed my mind.”

Lost and Confused

Some participants felt lost and confused when they enter into the programme for the first time. The following statements reflect the way the participants felt before undergoing the training: “I was lost and confused because I know little about career guidance staff”. Another participant said:

“If you don’t know what is going to happen, you feel lost and confused; I thought they (facilitators) were going to ask us questions as the teachers do at school.”

The following themes emerged after the participants were asked to reflect on their thoughts

and feelings after they had undergone the training programme.

Confidence

On the (second) segment that sought participants’ views after the training, the majority of these indicated that their confidence levels have been improved. Eighty percent (40) of the participants felt that the programme had boosted their levels of confidence when it comes to career decision-making process. This was mostly because participants lacked confidence, they did not trust the decision they made about their future careers. The following statement supports this argument: “Yes now I am more confident, trust myself and I know I could do it.” Another participant expressed the following view; “I Feel more confident and have a good idea how to teach other people about how to make an informed career choice.”

Positive Outlook

Most of the participants indicated that the training changed them for the better. Change took place at different levels, some felt that their thinking about careers have changed. Others believe that they learned and discovered many things about themselves. Some believe that the programme affected their personality. The following quotes support the above-mentioned arguments.

“Yes it has changed me a lot as well as my future career”

“Yes it affected me mentally because I had to do a lot of thinking”

“Definitely, I’m not shy anymore and it won’t be a huge thing to do work in front of other people”

Happy and Proud

More than half of the participants felt happy and proud since they will be able to train and empower other learners at their respective schools. Some felt happy and proud because the programme catered for their own career development needs and are ready for higher education. Here are some of the participants’ responses:

“I feel happy and proud of myself because now I can teach other learners about making

proper decisions and I want to go to varsity when I pass my matric"

"Oh yes it did, and I'm happy that I came and did the course"

"Yes it did, I'm feeling really happy, confident and proud because now I know where I stand in choosing a career."

Self-knowledge

On this aspect, eighty percent of the participants expressed the importance of self-knowledge in career decision making. Participants indicated that the programme made them feel that they really did not know themselves very well. The participants claimed to have developed skills for confronting problems. Here are some of their responses:

"I have learnt more things about career choices and self-knowledge but firstly I did not know that it is important to know yourself, so it helped though it stresses me to know that I don't know myself that well"

"Yes it has, it made me feel like I don't know myself so well and it is as though I must do research to find out who I really am."

From the above extracts, it appears that participants did not know themselves well and also did not know the importance of self-knowledge in career decision making process, as one participant elaborated:

"You first need to know yourself before choosing a career"

DISCUSSION

The results of the study reflect some of the issues and problems that learners experience, are a result of poor or lack of proper career guidance and development programmes in high schools both in urban and rural areas. For instance, data revealed that the learners or participants were 'scared', 'nervous' and 'lost and confused' prior to the implementation of the career guidance initiative. Most learners are unaware of such initiatives during their high school days. It is this lack of vital knowledge that manifests itself when learners present themselves in higher education. It is well documented that poor academic preparation (Makura et al. 2011; van Schalkwyk 2007; Wight and Maree 2007) and lack of career guidance (Bernes et al. 2007; Wight and Maree 2007; van Schalkwyk

2007; Sweet 2004; Stern 2003) in high school pose a major problem for post-secondary institutions. One of the issues concerning the difficulties in transitioning from high school to the institution of higher learning is inadequate or lack of career development programmes (Bernes et al. 2007) that can guide and advise high school learners of post-secondary entry requirements (Stern 2003). The lack of or inadequacy of career counseling and intervention programmes was revealed by our study sample. After the intervention, the learners or participants felt empowered, hence their reference to heightened 'confidence' and general happiness. Through the Cognitive Information Processing perspective (CIP) students as individuals were, and felt empowered to make informed career decisions through using information gained. Our sample was provided with skills meant to develop their processing abilities. As such, our sample as clients, claimed to have developed skills for confronting problems.

The findings of this study are consistent with the aforementioned argument. Most of the learners in the study, from poor and disadvantaged communities of Eastern Cape of South Africa felt lost, confused, and lacked confidence in making career choices due to the poor provision or lack of career guidance and development programmes in their respective schools. However, many of the participants felt more confident and proud after undergoing the training on career guidance and development.

Participants in this study also expressed positive feelings when they were asked about what they thought and felt after completed the training programme. Some indicated that they would like to go and study at the university when they finished matric. Research actually shows that most learners that have received career guidance in high school aim to enter higher education (Euvrard 1996). This means that career guidance has a positive effect on one's desire to enter higher education and this has implications for Department of Education in terms of its support for career guidance and development activities in high schools. The assumption therefore is that, if more learners receive proper career guidance while in high school, they will be in a position to make informed career choices and that has implications for tertiary education access. This means that proper career guidance and development programmes at high school

level are a necessity for tertiary education access.

The findings of this study suggest that learners' ability to make informed career choices was influenced by lack of self-knowledge. One participant indicated that not knowing yourself could be very stressful. The feelings and thoughts expressed by the participants before going through the training help buttress this argument. Zunker (2002) posits that, the life of typical high school learner is one full of uncertainty, turmoil and stress. The period of transition can wreak havoc on the learners' abilities to make informed decisions for the welfare of themselves and others.

It should be noted that many of the participants in the study expressed positive thoughts and feelings after completing the training programme. There was a shift or movement from negative territory (lost, confused, anxious, nervous, and scarred) to a positive state of feelings and thoughts (confident, positive outlook, self-knowledge and happy and proud). Through career guidance, society is able to allocate human resources and social equity in access to educational opportunities (Plant 2004). Previously marginalised communities such as those in some parts of South Africa could benefit. This access should be augmented by an improvement in career counseling training (Plant 2004) in such localities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that participants were satisfied with the programme and expressed positive thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Their levels of understanding and self-confidence in relation to making informed career choices had increased. Career development initiatives are a window for high school learners in disadvantaged societies to be capacitated to make informed career choices and decisions. Initially, they did not understand the purpose of the intervention; hence the initial reservations. Through the Questaview, the researchers were able to obtain some measure of perceived impacts of career development initiatives in a multicultural society. Hence, the sample in our study expressed both positive and negative sentiments on such interventions. At the end of the initiative, the learners felt empowered and were in a position to make informed decisions. Based on the foregoing, we therefore concluded that

the efficacy of the Career Development Programme coordinated by the University of Fort Hare among High School Learners in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa is very high.

Due to the efficacious character of career development and guidance interventions, learners will be in a position to make informed career choices relating to access and articulation into higher education. As such, tertiary institutions should mount more periodic and scheduled career development outreach programmes to inform prospective students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, it is highly recommended that the career guidance programme be sustained, and extended to more learners in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. This will assist many underprivileged learners with proper decision-making skills that are necessary for their personal growth and development. The department of basic education should employ qualified Life Orientation subject teachers who are dedicated, motivated and properly trained in the field of career guidance and development programmes. In short, there should be public policy and legislation that augment human capital development.

We suggest that universities put in place admission rules and regulations that compel schools and prospective candidates to undergo career counseling and development training. The career guidance programme should be tailor-made, to address the needs of the learners in a particular context given the diverse socio economic backgrounds of the learners. The rural-urban dynamic, which is always visible during career guidance and training workshops, could be taken into consideration if one wants to develop an effective career guidance programme. A computer assisted career guidance system may be developed for schools that have access to computer technology.

The sustainability and monitoring of the programme in schools should be maintained with the view to assisting the schools to take ownership of the programme and develop it further. We also implore researchers to use qualitative methodologies in interrogating career counseling and development programmes in disadvantaged communities. The use of a Questaview as a qualitative data-gathering instrument was instrumental in obtaining insight

into career development initiatives in South Africa. Hence, we implore researchers to adopt qualitative approaches in compiling career counseling and development data from societies with diverse populations such as South Africa. The results therefore, should help inform and shape social and public policy. Such policies contribute to national lifelong learning and active employment as well as addressing social imperfections such as gender, race and educational inequalities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sam Van Musschenbroek for assisting in the development of the Career Guidance programme for SANTED schools. Andile Mdikana for his contribution in the research methodology section.

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