

Factors Influencing the Choice of Geography as an Optional Subject: A Case of a Senior Secondary School in Botswana

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the factors which influence the choice of geography by final year students as an optional subject in a Botswana senior secondary school. It is often the case that a year to their final year in school, it is mandatory for students to offer some compulsory (core) subjects such as English and Mathematics, and Setswana but also have to choose some courses from a given list of optional subjects. In recent years, it has been observed that more students opt for geography from the list of available optional subjects. What factors influence those students opting for geography at the expense of other optional subjects in the same category? What are the implications for teacher education at this level of education? These and other related questions form the basis of this investigation. Data were collected from a sample of 218 final year students from a senior secondary school in Gaborone with the use of an instrument titled "Students' Choice of Geography." A major finding was the preference of Geography by students because of its relationship with their intended careers. The implications of this study, among others, include the organization of frequent workshops to students and the need to tailor teacher education curriculum to include career choice and the effective use of counseling facilities in schools.

INTRODUCTION

According to the *Curriculum Blueprint* for senior secondary school programme, the goal for education is to provide for lifelong education which will prepare citizens of Botswana for the transition from a traditional agro-based economy to the industrial economy that the country aspires to (Republic of Botswana 2002). To this end, the senior secondary education is geared towards building on the Basic Education Programme. The basic education in Botswana requires the student to go through a ten year formal education comprising seven years of primary and three years of junior secondary education. After the basic education of ten years, a student is admitted to the senior secondary school for two years to graduate as a secondary school leaver. This level of education is a continuation of the promotion of the all-round development of an individual in terms of the preparation for higher education and the world of work, and in sum total the achievement of the national ideals of *Kagisano* or social harmony (democracy, development, self-reliance, and unity).

The structure of education in Botswana is such that a six-year old child spends seven years at the primary school, three years at the junior secondary level (basic education), two years at

the senior secondary level and four years at the university level for a first degree. The senior secondary school education is geared to prepare the individual realize the goals mentioned above. The senior secondary school graduate, in realizing these goals, should therefore choose subjects from two broad areas, a core area which must be done by all students i.e. English, mathematics and Setswana (if a citizen of Botswana), and an optional area which also have four subgroups. Students are required to choose a minimum of one subject from each of the Sciences and Humanities and Social Science groups and a minimum of two subjects from the Creative, Technical and Vocational Group. For enrichment purposes students will select one subject from the Enrichment Group but will not be compelled to sit for an examination.

Statement of the Problem

Given this scenario, students are given the free hand to make their choices from an array of subjects. Some of the subjects are already compulsory for the students as earlier mentioned. These students are also given a free hand to choose from a list of optional subjects, and if possible, from a list of enrichment subjects for which they are not compelled to be examined. In

total, students are expected to choose a minimum of eight subjects. Usually, students offer 8 subjects. In choosing the optional subjects, the students must have certain reasons for doing so. In other words, some factors must have influenced their decisions in choosing some subjects as their options, and in this case Geography. An examination of students' choice of optional subjects in the last eight years depicts a preference for Geography at the national level. Even though a Guidance and Counselling Unit is available for students on personal, educational, social and vocational needs, the onus rests on the students to make the final selection of optional subjects, and Geography has been a popular choice of students. The table below shows the subject grouping of the broad two areas. The table shows the compulsory subjects in the core group. If a student is interested in the humanities or the social sciences, s/he chooses majority of the optional subjects from humanities and the social sciences column and if interested in the sciences, majority of the courses are chosen from the sciences column. The same applies to students who are interested in creative, technical and vocational subjects. As earlier stated, the enrichment subjects are non-examinable.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are two folds and are to:

- 1) Identify from students the reasons behind their choice of Geography over other optional subjects in the same category;
- 2) Explore the implications of the findings in this study for teacher education.

Brief Literature Review

At the time of this study, literature on the preference or choice of certain subjects relative to the others in Botswana is not available. A search of documents from the University library and the internet reveals previous studies on the subject has not been done in Botswana. However, literature on the choice of subjects in other environments reveals various reasons why students prefer to choose some subjects relative to the others. In a study in England on patterns of uptake and factors affecting subject preferences of 6000 A level students, it was generally found that the students think: the

subjects chosen would be enjoyable and interesting; useful for their future; or that they performed well in the subjects at the General Cambridge School Examinations (GCSE). The study further found that by contrast, the myths that students chose subjects because they are 'easy' or because of the pressure from friends, teachers, parents or from other sources seemed not to be influential.

A paper presented by Lang, Martin, Moore and Strickland (1992) on preferences and attitudes toward mathematics of students found that students' enjoyment of mathematics declines as they proceed from early elementary grades through the middle grades. Lazarowitz and Lazarowitz (2006) also found in their study in Israel that tended to choose their subjects in science based on personal factors.

METHODOLOGY

Altogether, there were 218 Form 5 students offering Geography in the year 2004. All the Form 5 students were requested to fill in a questionnaire titled 'Students' Choice of Geography'. However, 205 available students filled in the questionnaire, forming the purposive sample of this study.

The method adopted in data collection involved the use of a questionnaire titled 'Students' Choice of Geography' for Form 5 Geography students. The questionnaire consisted of two sections, A and B. Section A elicited biographic information of students as to their age and gender (male or female). Section B elicited information from students on their preference of Geography over other subjects in the same category. A blank space was provided for students to freely write as many reasons as possible on their reasons for their choice of Geography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, 205 students responded the questionnaire by writing on the blank spaces provided the reasons or factors influencing their choice of Geography over other subjects in the same category. With respect to the first objective, Table 1 shows the reasons adduced by students for preferring Geography to other subjects in the same category and in the order of importance.

Majority of students (95%) prefer to choose geography because it is related to their intended career. This reason listed by 195 of the 205

students was rank-ordered as Number 1. The students mentioned the major reason for choosing Geography because they would want to become pilots, meteorologists, archeologists, environmentalists and geologists in future. This finding concurs with the finding of the Research Division of Cambridge Assessment (2007) which found that students choose certain subjects because they would be useful in their future career.

The teachers have a significant impact on students' choice of geography through counseling. The teachers might have served as role models for some students and would want to choose subjects that the teachers teach in schools. No wonder 73% of the students decided to take Geography as an optional subject. The influence of the teacher on the students can therefore not be overemphasized.

The relationship between social studies (taught at the junior secondary level) is also a factor in the students' choice of Geography at the senior secondary level. As earlier stated, Social Studies, which is related to Geography, is taught at the junior secondary level while Geography is taught at the senior secondary level in Botswana. This being the case, students who have offered Social Studies at the junior secondary school may

wish to offer Geography at the senior secondary school because of the close relationship between the two subjects. Students in this case, may want to take advantage of related concepts or familiarity with contents in Social Studies to prefer Geography. This reason is third in rank as chosen by 61% of the students.

This relationship may contribute to many students responding that geography is the easiest of all the available options. Fifty-four percent of the students think that Geography is the easiest of all the subjects in comparison with History, Development Studies and Literature in English. A conversation with some of the students depict that students have the idea that one had to read more in terms of time to be able to pass the other options well.

Generally, senior secondary students do not want to become professional teachers. Teaching is regarded as a profession for "them" and not "us". Only 9% of the students would want to choose Geography in order to become future teachers. Of the 205 students, only 19 students would want to become teachers in the future with the reason ranking 6. This finding collaborates with the study of Adeyemi (2001) who found that students hate the teaching profession.

Table 1: Subject groupings

Core Group	Optional group			
	Humanities & Social Sciences	Sciences	Creative, Technical & Vocational	Enrichment
English	History	Single Science	Design & Technology	Third Language
Setswana	Geography	Double Science	ArtFood and Nutrition	Physical Education
Mathematics	*Social Studies	Chemistry	Computer StudiesFashion & Fabrics	Music
	Development Studies	Physics	Business StudiesHome Management	Religious Education
	Literature in English	Biology		Moral Education
		Human & Social		
		Biology (Only for private candidates)		

*Note: Subgroup ENRICHMENT to cover general skills development courses, small entry subjects and non examinable subjects. Cultural studies, Fundamentals of Production and Environmental and Social Studies which are currently being piloted will be reviewed and classified into the option groups.

Table 2: Overall preference of geography by students

Reasons	Frequency of mention	%	Rank order
Geography-based career e.g. pilot, meteorologist, archeologist, environmentalist, geologist	195	95	1
Easiest of all other options in the subgroup	111	54	4
Mere interest to travel to important geographical sites (Wants to tour the world)	41	20	5
Related to social studies already done at the junior secondary level	126	61	3
To become a teacher of geography	19	9	6
Counselling (from teachers)	150	73	2
Counselling (from peers)	10	5	7
Others (difficult to categorise)	6	3	8

Implications for Teacher Education

Frequent workshop for students on career choice is necessary. Experience has shown that interests in careers change with time. Even though the schools offer Counselling facilities to students, the effective use of the facility should be further encouraged. It is highly necessary to honestly guide the students on the relationship between their intended future careers and the subjects to choose at school. Further, all teachers should also offer a form of course in Career Counselling technique in their teacher education programme with the aim efficiently guiding their students.

The need for teacher education programme to encourage interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary approach in teaching, thereby teasing out the relationship between subject compartments during the foundation level at schools. It was found that many students who took Social Studies at the junior secondary school level opted to choose Geography at the senior secondary level. This being so, an interdisciplinary approach to teaching may also be encouraged at the teachers' training colleges. For instance, Integrated Science, Social Studies, Development Studies, Language Arts which rely on the interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning, can be further introduced into the curricula of teacher training colleges to bring out the relationship between and among subjects.

Further encouragement of the curriculum that is rich in curiosity, reflection to make students wonder about universal phenomena – what is it that is happening in the immediate and the global environments.

The need to make teaching likable or attractive by way of the status of teachers in terms of remuneration, command of respect as in other professions such as banking, medicine, politics, and administration. Evidence suggests that most students do not want to be teachers. A way of making the teaching profession attractive is for the authorities to make opportunities in all professions be at par with each other.

CONCLUSIONS

Some of the few conclusions that can be drawn from this investigation include the following:

There is a correlation between the choice of optional subjects in schools by students and their

intended future careers. For instance, becoming a pilot, a meteorologist, or an environmentalist requires that the student is well grounded in the skills of geography.

Further, some teachers tend to provide role models for students when it comes to choice of optional subjects. Students look up to their teachers to provide role models and so might want to choose the subjects being taught by the teachers.

Initial familiarity of subjects to students may influence their choice of optional subjects. Social studies provides a typical example in the sense that some concepts taught at the junior secondary schools continue to be taught at the senior secondary school level, although in more depth than at the junior secondary level.

Generally, students do not want to become teachers. It is now a common belief among students to prefer some other professions than teaching. Hence, any subject that tends to lend itself to teaching is avoided by students.

There is the need for teacher education programme to do more students advising. Teachers are seen as parents, role models and advisers, in addition to their normal duties. Therefore, the pre-service and in-service education of teacher trainees should be such that would equip the candidates with the skills of advising students on career choice, all in an attempt at helping students to choose optional subjects best suited to their intended future careers.

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