

---

Title	The career development of secondary students in Singapore
Author(s)	Peter Khor and Cheng Yuanshan
Source	<i>ERA Conference, Singapore, 23-25 November 1998</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

## **Symposium: A Longitudinal Study on the Cognitive, Psychological Development and School Adjustment of Secondary School Students --- Some Preliminary Findings**

The Career Development of Secondary Students in Singapore

Peter Khor & Cheng Yuanshan  
National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological University

### **Introduction**

According to many theories of career development, adolescents are at the stage of career exploration, crystallisation of tentative career choices, and engagement in the process of career decision-making or career planning (e.g. Super 1980). Locally, for example, Khor (1994) has found that Secondary Four students were engaged in circumscribing job-self incompatible occupations and had tentative "best bet" career choices with a range of acceptable occupational alternatives in mind. In career decision making, Ng (1996) found in his study of a sample of Junior College students that self-efficacy in career decision making was strongest in students who had decided on their educational and career aspirations than those who were tentative or undecided in their career choices. Therefore, at different stages of development adolescents are involved in specific career development activities.

This paper on the other hand examines the career development of a sample of younger adolescents (Secondary One to Three) in terms of their career orientation, career planning, career decisiveness and perceptions of parental involvement in this whole process. Particularly, differences in career development by age, gender and course of study are examined. As part of a five-year longitudinal study on the various cognitive, social and psychological aspects of Singaporean adolescent development, this study is still ongoing; therefore the results presented in this paper should be treated as preliminary findings at best.

### **Method**

A sample of 344 students from four secondary schools taking part in the study responded to the same 23 items measuring their career development and perceptions of parental involvement in the career choice process over a 3-year period (1995-1997). A principal components analysis yielded three clearly interpretable factors accounting for 40% of the variance explained. 19 Items loading onto these factors constituted the following scales for subsequent analysis: A) Career Orientation and Planning (COP) scale; B) Career Decision-Making (CDM) scale and C) Parental Support (PS) scale. These comprised of five, six, and eight items each, with alphas of .60 (COP), .67 (CDM) and .86 (PS) respectively. MANOVAs were performed to examine age, gender and course of study differences over a 3-year period for each scale. Together with descriptive statistics and frequency distributions of selected scale items, these results are reported in Tables 1 to 9 below.

### **Results**

Tables 1 and 2 show the results in terms of the Career Orientation and Planning (COP) scale.

The mean scores in Table 1 indicate that the students generally evidenced some idea of career orientation and planning; some thoughts were given to their future careers over a 3-year period, which generally remained unchanged. Table 2 shows that in terms of career orientation, 8 out of 10 students indicated they were aware of their own interests in relation to career choices, as well as the kind of work that would be satisfying to them. However, while slightly more than half indicated they had made some kind of tentative career choice, about the same number also indicated they did not know how to go about career planning. These results were consistently so over three years.

No gender or course (Express, Normal Academic and Normal Technical) differences were found for the COP scale.

**A. Career Orientation and Planning (COP) Scale**  
**(No of items = 5; Min = 5, Max = 20; Alpha = .60)**

*Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for COP Scale*

N = 344	Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Remarks
Mean	13.45	13.35	13.41	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some idea of career orientation and planning</li> <li>MANOVA shows no significant differences in COP for Gender and Stream</li> </ul>
S.D.	2.49	2.45	2.60	

*Table 2: Percentage of Sample AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE to COP Items*

Career Orientation and Planning Items	Sec 1 (N=344)	Sec 2 (N=344)	Sec 3 (N=344)
• Know how own interests can relate to career	88	82	83
• Some idea of the kind of satisfying work to me	79	81	81
• Made a tentative career choice	54	57	55
• Don't know how to go about career planning	55	61	58

Tables 3 to 6 below show the results for the Career Decision-Making (CDM) scale. The mean scores in Table 3 indicate that the students were generally career indecisive over the 3 years. They seemed to be slightly more indecisive when they were in Secondary 2. Tables 4 and 5 show there were significant differences in career decisiveness by gender and course. Females were more career indecisive than Males, while the Normal Technical pupils were more career indecisive than the Express students were.

**B. Career Decision Making (CDM) Scale**  
 (No of items = 6; Min = 6, Max = 24; Alpha = .67)

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for CDM Scale

N = 344	Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Remarks
Mean S.D.	13.48 3.20	13.06 3.24	13.37 3.21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career indecisive over 3 year period</li> <li>• Slightly more so in 2<sup>nd</sup> year</li> </ul>

Table 4: Gender Differences in CDM Scale

GENDER		Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Overall Mean	Remarks
MALE (n=158)	Mean S.D.	13.81 3.17	13.18 3.40	13.65 3.26	<b>13.48</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career indecisive over 3 year period for both sexes</li> </ul>
FEMALE (n=186)	Mean S.D.	13.21 3.20	12.96 3.10	13.13 3.16	<b>12.79</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MANOVA F (1,338)=4.99; p&lt;. 02 show FEMALEs more career indecisive than males.</li> </ul>

Table 5: Course Differences in CDM Scale

COURSE		Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Overall Mean	Remarks
EXPRESS (n=191)	Mean S.D.	13.77 3.29	13.36 3.44	13.65 3.18	<b>13.61*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career indecisive over 3 year period</li> </ul>
NM ACAD (n=103)	Mean S.D.	13.16 2.99	12.82 2.92	12.90 2.96	<b>12.98</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slightly more so in 2<sup>nd</sup> year</li> </ul>
NM TECH (n=50)	Mean S.D.	13.06 3.24	12.40 2.95	13.26 3.73	<b>12.82*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MANOVA F (1, 338)=3.42, p&lt;. 03, shows NM TECH students more career indecisive than EXPRESS students.</li> </ul>

Table 6: Percentage of Sample AGREE/STRONGLY AGREE to CDM Items

Career Decision Making Items	Sec 1 (N=344)	Sec 2 (N=344)	Sec 3 (N=344)
• Many interesting jobs, hard to decide	80	80	75
• Dream about future job, no idea what is suitable	68	78	78
• No idea what kind of work is suitable	68	69	63
• Many voices telling me something different about future career ... confused	61	72	68
• Keep changing my mind about suitable job	61	62	62

In terms of making career decisions, Table 6 shows nearly 8 out of 10 students found it hard to decide on a career with so many interesting jobs to consider. However, slightly more than 6 out of 10 students seemed to be thinking about their future careers, although they were not sure what was really suitable. This number had increased to nearly 8 out of 10 students by Secondary Two and Three. More than 60% also indicated they were somewhat confused as to what job was suitable since there were many voices presumably giving them information. Perhaps that was why a similar proportion indicated they kept changing their minds about a suitable career.

Tables 7 to 9 below show the results for the Parental Support (PS) scale. In terms of parental involvement, the mean scores in Table 7 suggest students generally perceived their parents as positively supporting them in their career planning and decision making process. Gender differences (Table 8) were found in that Males perceived more parental support in these matters than Females.

### C. Parental Support (PS) Scale (No of items = 8; Min = 8, Max = 32; Alpha = .86)

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for Parental Support Scale

N = 344	Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Remarks
Mean	20.93	21.10	21.29	• Positive parental support in career planning and choice over 3 year period.
S.D.	5.75	5.44	5.47	

Table 8: Gender Differences in Parental Support Scale

GENDER		Sec 1	Sec 2	Sec 3	Overall Mean	Remarks
MALE (n=158)	Mean S.D.	21.64 5.85	22.03 5.34	21.91 5.24	<b>21.86</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive parental support for career planning and choice over 3 years</li> </ul>
FEMALE (n=186)	Mean S.D.	20.32 5.61	20.31 5.42	20.75 5.61		

Table 9: Percentage of Sample Indicating MODERATE/LARGE EXTENT of Parental Support

Parental Support Items	Sec 1 (N=344)	Sec 2 (N=344)	Sec 3 (N=344)
• Parents listen, suggest but leave career choice to me	70	72	71
• Approve of my career plans, makes it easier for me	70	69	73
• Help me clarify my interests and abilities	61	63	61
• Willing to finance me even if career not their preference but mine	59	65	67
• Help me find out more about careers I'm interested in	56	48	54
• Actively discuss with me regarding career choice	53	55	57
• Encourage me to plan my career early	47	51	57
• Help me through process of deciding on a career	46	49	49

Table 9 above shows that the majority of students perceived their parents' involvement as listening, making suggestions but leaving the choice and planning to them. Parents were also perceived as helping the students clarify their own interests, abilities, actively discussing career plans, and a willingness to finance their children's career pursuits even if it was not their (i.e. the parents') preferred choice. Slightly half also indicated their parents helped them find out more about careers they were interested in. And by Secondary Three, parental involvement seemed to have increased for most items in the scale.

## Discussion and Concluding Remarks

While the preliminary findings showed a certain degree of career indecisiveness on the part of the students, this may be expected to change in subsequent years. The students in this sample are in the early stage of career exploration and crystallisation and would not be expected to have made definite choices. In fact it has been found that even at JC level, there existed a certain degree of developmental career indecision, a normal process adolescents go through as they make the transition into early adulthood (Lim, 1995). However, the fact that more than half of the present students was thinking about their future careers as early as Secondary One is encouraging. This may be due to the implementation of the Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Programme in the schools for several years now. This is in contrast to nearly 10 years ago when an earlier survey (Khor, 1987) found that even at Secondary Four, the majority of students had no clear career directions with only 40% of 438 students had thought seriously about their future careers. Lastly, in the present study, even more encouraging is the finding that students perceived their parents as very involved in their career planning and choices. More importantly, parents were not perceived as pressuring them (the students) to yield to their own (i.e. parents') preferences. Whether this perception would be unchanged when the students get to Secondary Four remains to be seen.

## References

- Khor, S.Y. (1987). The case for career guidance: the plight of Secondary Four students in Singapore. *Singapore Journal of Education*, 8(2), 20-24.
- Khor, S.Y. (1994). *The occupational aspirations of Singaporean students: Circumscription and compromise*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne.
- Lim, H.H. (1995). *Factors related to career indecision in a sample of Junior College students*. Unpublished MEd thesis, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.
- Ng, S.K. (1996). *Career decision-making self-efficacy in relation to career aspirations among Junior College One students*. Unpublished MEd thesis, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.
- Super, D.E. (1980). A life space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16, 282-298.