The Case for Career Guidance: The Plight of Secondary Four Students in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

A systematic survey conducted by the Institute of Education involving school personnel and prospective employers of school leavers showed that Secondary Four students were generally lacking in job knowledge, job application skills and had no clear career directions. They were often unrealistic about their educational aspirations, job preferences and were overly materialistic in job values. The survey highlighted the urgent need for career guidance in Singapore schools.

Introduction

Choosing a career is one of the most important decisions of anybody's life since this can have an effect on the individual for up to fifty years or more. At all stages of full-time education (primary, secondary and tertiary) decisions about the future have to be made, and educational choice will invariably involve career choice (Dibden and Tomlinson, 1981). Such decisions are even more crucial for those who are leaving school soon, either to go into the world of work or further post-secondary education. This is especially so in the face of recessionary and other economic and social factors that have led to a worldwide trend in the decline in employment for youth (Banducci, 1984).

Similar concerns are, no doubt, current in the Singapore situation where the workforce is a relatively young one. And in our case, there is the added dimension of not only aiming for full employment but to ensure productivity as well. To enhance this and to maximise our limited human resources, there is a need to ensure a better match between the right talents and the right job. In this light, it is the educational system that necessarily bears the burden of preventive action in terms of preparing students for the world of work (Banducci,

1984). This will imply, amongst other things, some form of career guidance to be provided in our schools. Students need realistic information, real work exposure and the opportunity to discuss issues of adult work life. This information would give them a perspective from which to make decisions and consider their future (Olsen, 1979).

The Minister for Education and the twelve principals on the study tour of acknowledged good schools in the UK and the USA found it laudable that these schools paid proper and adequate attention to career guidance, particularly, in the form of "course guidance". The school felt itself obliged to influence a pupil's choice of course and career on the basis of a realistic assessment of his ability and in relation to parental preferences. The results of such guidance were found to be rewarding in that students were more likely to fulfil their ambitions or parental expectations, and cultivated in each student was the acceptance of his personal ability. It is therefore not surprising that the *Towards Excellence In Schools* report (February 1987) recommended (amongst other things) career guidance for our schools.

What data is there to suggest there is a need for career guidance in our schools?

Two years ago, a systematic survey of the career perceptions, plans and specific needs of Secondary Four students was conducted by an Institute of Education career guidance project team. This paper presents the findings[1] of the survey (Khor et al, 1984), the implications of which will also be discussed. Although conducted sometime ago, there is no reason to believe that the current situation has changed much. There is a need for career guidance in our schools as this paper will hope to show.

Methodology

The Questionnaire and Data Collection

The project team designed a questionnaire to find out what were students' career plans and aspirations like, whether they were knowledgeable about jobs and the world of work, their sources of career information, criteria by which they choose certain jobs, and what kind of help they would like to get from their schools in terms of career guidance.

Copies of the questionnaire were sent to 143 secondary schools with the request for its return by a certain date. Schools were asked to take their best and their weakest secondary four classes for the survey. This gave a total of 2 classes per school.

One hundred and six schools returned completed questionnaires. Of these, 71 met an extended deadline to be in time for data analysis. Their responses were coded and entered into the computer data file for processing.

In addition, the research team also went out to interview 9 personnel managers in various industries (transport, finance and business, manufacturing, service, entertainment, building and construction) that employed large batches of fresh school leavers. This was to find out how they felt about young job applicants.

The Sample

Table 1.1 shows the composition of students whose responses were entered in the computer data file for the 71 schools. From these, a stratified random sample (N = 438) was further selected to reflect the pupil ratio by stream and gender. The composition of this sample is shown in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.1 — TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS FROM 71 SCHOOLS

Stream	Male	Female	Total*
Normal	231	222	253
Express	411	528	939
Special	30	24	54
Total	672	774	1446

* Many schools have only Express classes and therefore, the schools selected two Express classes for the survey. This accounts for the apparent preponderance of Express students. Also there were very few schools with Special stream students that responded to the survey.

TABLE 1.2 — SAMPLE ON WHICH THE PRESENT STUDY IS BASED

Stream	Male	Female	Total
Normal	110 (50.2%)	110 (50.2%)	220 (50.2%)
Express	85 (38.8%)	85 (38.8%)	170 (38.8%)
Special	24 (11.0%)	24 (11.0%)	48(100.0%)
Total	219(100.0%)	219(100.0%)	438(100.0%)

* The Normal : Express : Special ratio of 5:4:1 was taken as a guide in selecting students to form the sample.

Analysis of Data

To facilitate the presentation of results, items in the questionnaire that were related and reflected a similar theme were grouped together. The results were also cross checked for consistency. The findings of various questions either confirmed or complemented one another, with an emerging consistent picture.

Results and Findings

Students' Thinking about Their Future Careers (Table 2.1)

Of the total sample of 438 students, only about 40% of students thought seriously about their future careers while 58.4% had at least sometimes thought seriously about this. While there was a slight difference between boys and girls, there was a progressive decline in concern about future careers from the normal to express and special streams.

TABLE 2.1 — STUDENTS' THINKING ABOUT THEIR FUTURE CAREERS

Frequency of Thinking About Future Career	Total	Sex		Stream		
	N = 438 %	Males N = 219 %	Females N = 219 %	Normal N = 220 %	Express N = 170 %	Special N = 48 %
Often	39.5	37.4	41.1	44.1	37.1	25.0
Sometimes	58.4	57.1	58.9	53.2	60.6	70.8
Never	1.8	3.7	0.0	1.8	1.8	2.1
Omission	0.3	1.8	0.0	0.9	0.5	2.1

TABLE 2.2 — STUDENTS' DISCUSSION WITH AND GETTING HELP FROM VARIOUS PERSONS CONCERNING FUTURE CAREERS

Frequency of Thinking About Future Career	Discussion with . . .					Help from . . .					
	Friend %	Mother %	Father %	Siblings %	Teacher %	Friend %	Teacher %	Father %	No One %	Mother %	Siblings %
Often N = 172	45.9	42.4	30.2	12.2	8.7	48.3	29.1	23.8	15.1	12.2	9.3
Sometimes N = 254	41.3	29.5	27.6	7.9	5.9	47.6	22.8	24.0	22.1	15.4	6.3
Never N = 8	25.0	37.5	50.0	25.0	25.0	37.5	50.0	50.0	37.5	37.5	25.0

Students' Discussion With and Getting Help From Significant Others Concerning Future Careers (Table 2.2)

For the students who often thought seriously about their future careers, FRIENDS were the persons they would discuss their career plans with most (45.9%). This was followed by family members with MOTHER being slightly preferred over FATHER. This was also true of those students who only sometimes thought seriously about their careers. For both groups, however, TEACHERS were the last persons they would discuss their career plans with.

In terms of sources of help, similarly for both groups, FRIENDS were the persons the students would first approach for help if they needed further career information. FATHER and TEACHER were the next best source of help followed by MOTHER and SIBLINGS.

On the whole, less than half of the total sample had discussed with or sought help from various persons in terms of further career explorations.

Students' Educational Aspirations (Table 3.1) and Job Preferences (Table 3.2)

Generally, educational aspirations were high. More than 43% of the total sample aspired to the university. Such high aspirations were expected in the case of the special stream students where almost all (95.7%) aimed for a university degree. But in the case of the normal stream students (who were academically the weakest) their educational aspirations were unrealistically high with more than half the number aspiring to GCE 'A' level and university.

Students' job preferences also appeared to be unrealistic, with about half the total sample

TABLE 3.1 — THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Level	Total N = 436 %	Sex		Stream		
		Male N = 217 %	Female N = 219 %	Normal N = 219 %	Express N = 170 %	Special N = 47 %
University Degree	43.4	45.2	41.6	19.6	59.4	95.7
IE Certificate	3.7	0.9	6.4	2.7	5.3	2.1
VITB Certificate	3.9	4.2	3.7	6.8	1.2	—
GCE 'A'	20.9	18.4	23.3	31.1	12.9	2.1
Poly Diploma	13.3	18.4	8.2	14.2	15.9	—
GCE 'O'	12.8	11.1	14.6	21.9	4.7	—
GCE 'N'	1.8	1.4	2.3	3.7	—	—
Omits	0.2	0.5	—	—	—	—

TABLE 3.2 — STUDENTS' JOB PREFERENCES

Job Preferred	Total N = 436 %	Sex		Stream		
		Male N = 217 %	Female N = 219 %	Normal N = 219 %	Express N = 170 %	Special N = 47 %
Professional, Technical and Related Workers	48.8	49.8	47.9	33.2	60.8	78.3
Administrative and Managerial Workers	3.3	2.3	4.3	2.3	4.8	2.2
Clerical and Related Workers	13.4	2.8	24.2	19.2	9.6	—
Sales Workers	7.5	7.0	8.1	8.4	6.0	8.7
Service Workers	12.0	13.0	10.9	17.3	8.4	—
Agricultural, Animal Husbandry, Forestry Workers, Fishermen and Hunters	—	—	—	—	—	—
Production and Related Workers, Transport Equipment Operators and Labourers	4.5	7.9	1.0	7.0	2.4	—
SAF	5.9	9.8	1.9	8.9	3.6	—

TABLE 4 — COMPARISON OF JOB KNOWLEDGE BY STREAM

Job Chosen	Normal			Express			Special		
	N*	Specific %	Non-specific %	N*	Specific %	Non-specific %	N*	Specific %	Non-specific %
Professional/ Technical	68	30.9	69.1	91	32.9	67.1	33	63.6	36.4
Administrative/ Managerial	5	0.0	100.0	8	37.5	62.5	1	100.0	0.0
Clerical and Related Jobs	37	13.5	86.5	13	38.5	61.5	0	—	—
Sales Workers	16	6.2	93.8	10	20.0	80.0	4	0.0	100.0
Production/ Operators	14	28.6	71.4	4	66.7	33.3	0	—	—
Other (Including SAF)	18	41.2	58.8	6	33.3	66.7	0	—	—
Unclassified	8	0.0	100.0	7	0.0	100.0	5	0.0	100.0
Omission	6	—	—	4	—	—	2	—	—

* Actual numbers of students choosing a particular job.

(49%) preferring jobs in the professional, technical and related work category. Even though there was an expected progression from the normal (33%) to the express (61%) and then the special (78%) streams, the figure for those in the normal stream seemed to be rather high and unrealistic. Very few preferred administrative and managerial jobs and more girls than boys preferred clerical-related types of jobs.

Students' Job Knowledge (Table 4)

In the questionnaire students were asked to indicate the job that they would like to take up after finishing their education. To find out how knowledgeable they were about these jobs, they were asked to name two important things that people working on these jobs had to do. Their responses were coded as indicating specific or non-specific knowledge about the jobs they were interested in.

It can be seen that in almost all the job categories the majority of the normal and express stream students were judged to be not knowledgeable about the jobs they were interested in. However, the latter appeared to be more knowledgeable than the former. Special stream students, on the other hand, seemed better informed about jobs than those of the other two streams. It would seem, therefore, that pupils in academically better streams were better informed about jobs in general than those in lower academic tracks.

Students' Criteria for Selecting a Job

Although 15 job values (e.g. "I can be my own boss", "I have a chance to be creative", "I have a chance to travel" etc) were listed and the students were to choose three that were most important to them and rank them in order, the job values that were ranked first and second consistently for both sexes and all streams were 1) "I find the work interesting" and 2) "The pay is good".

Help Requested by Students and Its Urgency

Students were asked to indicate what kind of help they would like to have in terms of career guidance, and how "urgent" or "not urgent" these were. The following shows the kinds of needs indicated and the percentage of students who considered them as urgent:

(1) To know more about a specific job that they had in mind (82.7%).
(2) To find out what types of jobs they were suited for (80.6%).

(3) To be told the various steps involved in getting a job (74.6%).
(4) Need to talk to someone to find out about the jobs available (65.2%).
(5) Need to read about the different types of jobs available (61.9%).
(6) To be told how to prepare for a job interview (61.2%).
(7) Need help in writing an application letter for a specific job (37.1%).

On the whole, a comparison of responses by gender showed there was no great difference between the boys and girls. However, the girls saw more urgency in talking to someone to find out about the jobs available. Also, more of them wanted to be told the various steps involved in getting a job (79.8% compared to 69.4% of the boys).

In terms of stream, both the special (70%) and the normal (87%) students indicated it was an urgent need to know more about a specific job. The express stream students (85%), on the other hand, indicated that they urgently needed help to find out what type of jobs they were suited for.

Findings from Interviews with Personnel Managers

The perceptions of company personnel reinforced many of the findings from the above survey. Those interviewed reported they found fresh school leavers seeking jobs with their companies were often motivated by pay which was their primary concern, and some tended to be unrealistic in terms of salary expectations. Many did not like shift work or routine jobs but expected fast promotions.

Young job seekers were also found to be generally ignorant or lacking in job knowledge and had no clear career directions. They were also seriously lacking in job application skills, such as in writing a letter or filling in an application form and conducting themselves well at interviews. Many of the company representatives suggested that these skills be taught in the schools.

Discussion and Implications

Although not reported here, Poh et al (1984) in a companion survey (N = 104 schools) and

interviews with key school personnel (N = 11) found that career guidance was sadly neglected with the schools lacking in both human and material resources to provide effective guidance for their students. Further, two-thirds of school personnel surveyed considered career guidance to be urgently needed. The present study was conducted to gather information concerning the career needs and concerns of would-be school leavers with the view towards the development of career guidance in Singapore schools. In this light, several trends in the results merit discussion.

While Evans and Poole (1985) found in their study that the major concerns that adolescents in their sample perceived as important in their lives were "jobs" and "education or educational hurdles" the present survey showed that less than 45% of the students had often thought about their future careers. As for educational aspirations and job preferences, these were found generally to be unrealistically high, especially in the case of the academically weaker students. It may be that many of the students surveyed have the mistaken belief that they need not bother to think about careers so long as they are likely to continue their education. Nevertheless, there is a need to encourage these secondary four students to be more concerned with their future careers, and career guidance in the schools would have to be individualised and personalised as far as possible. Guidance in the form of relating educational planning to a future targetted career should also be given since there is evidence to suggest that students often make career decisions based on limited, inadequate, or faulty information (Grotevant and Durrett, 1980; Salomone and Mckenna, 1982).

It is also interesting to note that students' confidence in sources of career information or assistance seem to be inversely related to the sources' competence. Thus, they generally prefer to consult friends than their parents, preferring parents to teachers and least of all guidance teachers. Similar findings have also been reported where students relied not on formal resources provided in schools but rather on informal sources such as parents, friends, and television (Chapman and Katz, 1981) while Noeth et al (1984) found that nearly half of the students in their study felt that counselors

were not helpful to them in making career decisions.

In the Singapore context, these results suggest the need for teachers to self-examine their roles as helpers in the career decision-making process. Perhaps there is a need for them to be more active in initiating dialogues, discussions, individual career counselling and group guidance sessions with the students concerning their career interests? Combining this with effective dissemination of various relevant reading materials on various jobs, organising more career talks and visits to industries or other work places (activities that students themselves found useful), this would put teachers in an effective position to help their students prepare or plan for their future careers.

Further, any career guidance system in the school serving as either a direct consultant or facilitator in the career development process of students must coordinate the involvement of important others (i.e. parents, peers, the community) at various stages throughout the process (Bratcher, 1982; Castricone et al, 1982; Brik and Blimline 1984). All parents should be given an orientation on what they should or should not do in helping their children decide on their careers. Organisations that are concerned directly or indirectly with employment or training for future employment should be involved in the process of developing, maintaining and improving a comprehensive system of career guidance in schools.

Lastly while Helwig (1984) found in his study that job security was the most important consideration in selecting a job for his sample, the results of the present survey showed these to be "interesting work" and "good pay". If these values become obsessive they could give rise to the phenomenon of job-hopping when one's interest in the work or expectations of "good pay" changes with time, as can be expected.

Conclusion

This study has found that those who need career guidance most seem to be least catered for. Whereas tertiary institutions do have units which provide assistance to their students regarding careers, few schools have anything like this other than ad hoc arrangements.

Perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that while transition from school to work is of major concern in most other countries, locally, there seems to be greater public concern over transition from school to tertiary institution. Yet the needs are there when students are found to be ill prepared for the world of work and leave school with little job knowledge and job application skills and a lack of career direction. This underscores the urgent need to have career education as part of the regular school curriculum which incorporates not only career guidance for individuals or groups but also the development of job application and transition skills. In this respect, the recommendation made by the *Towards Excellence In Schools* report (February 1987) is most timely. However, the form of career education is yet another question.

NOTE

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