

Research Article

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Trapped in the ‘Web’: Challenges of Grade 9 Pupils in Choosing a Course to Pursue in Senior High Schools in Ghana

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Abstract: Grade 9 pupils’ choice of a course to pursue in senior high school in Ghana is a decision made at a young age usually below 16 years. Therefore, these young pupils rely on other persons for help when making such a decision. Previous research found that instead of assisting, these social agents rather interfere with this decision-making process. This study explored the challenges grade 9 pupils face in choosing courses in their transition to senior high school by seeking the views of the pupils and their teachers/counsellors using a questionnaire and interview guide. The findings showed that fathers, mothers, siblings, finances and orientation at home were the major obstacles the pupils faced when selecting a course to pursue. Other challenges found in the school setting included teacher interferences and peer distractions. The study concluded that grade 9 pupils have a great challenge from their social milieu when choosing a course to pursue at the senior high school level. The study recommended that school counsellors/heads should educate parents, guardians and teachers on how to guide pupils in choosing a course to pursue at the SHS level.

Keywords: Course of study; Home factors; School factors; Grade 9 pupils; Senior high schools.

1 Introduction

In Ghana, the transition of pupils from junior high school (JHS) to senior high school (SHS) level requires a choice of a course they intend to pursue at the SHS level, and this creates several challenges for the pupils, teachers and parents at large (Ajayi, 2012). The ability to select the right course to pursue at the SHS level forms the basis of building a good career choice in future for most persons. It also helps to alleviate unnecessary delays in the career goals of the younger generation (Soomro & Ahmad, 2012). Research has shown that JHS pupils in Ghana usually face a dilemma in selecting the right course to study due to their inability to identify their strengths, and thus, follow the views of their colleagues and parents on the career path to choose (see Acheampong, 2014; Boateng & Gaulee, 2019). Given this, the choice of SHS courses becomes very challenging for the pupils (Ashong, 2002). The choice of courses to pursue at the SHS level are made at a stage where the majority of the pupils are not mature. Most of them may be naïve about what goes into a particular SHS course, and how this will shape their career path in future (Jackson, 2015). For example, Ashong (2002) observed that first year SHS students in Ghana had inadequate knowledge of the courses they were pursuing, and most of them also felt that they had made wrong choices.

Choosing a course to study in further education (i.e., SHS) can be a dicey decision to take (Jensen, 2010). This is because some learners may not be very brilliant at the basic school level but turn out to do very well in the SHS when they have already selected a course to read. Further, potential development in some individuals takes time and only comes as they grow up. Thus, this decision can be delicate and should be handled with all seriousness because the ultimate result could go badly wrong for a child (Stachowski, 2011). According to Yang (2008), the consequences of choosing a course that misfit learners’ abilities, interests and passions have landed many at unintended destinations. It is, therefore, important to

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emphasize that taking a wrong career pathway can stain one's pleasure in life as this could lead to career instability. Making poor career decisions can result in doom not only for the person but also for the whole community (Pafili & Mylanakis, 2011).

Due to the limited knowledge of pupils concerning the choice of secondary education courses, they mostly rely on actors in their social milieu. Scholars have mentioned that grade 9 pupils usually seek support from peers (Navin, 2009; Palos & Drobot, 2010), teachers/counsellors/headteachers (Van & Mansori, 2013), and family (Akomolafe, 2003) to select career pathways. For instance, there is a general impression that educating people in science-related fields are expensive such that parents who struggle to take care of their children in school do not usually encourage their children to pursue STEM courses (see Anderson & Kim, 2006; Herrera & Hurtado, 2011). Findings from Ode, Babayeju, and Onalowu (2013) also showed that parents made their children believe that some courses were for a particular gender. Among all other things, parents were noted to be among the toughest and the most consistent determinant of students' attitudes towards selecting a specific course of study and consequently, the choice of career (Acheampong, 2014; Awan, Sarwar, Mehdi, Noureen, & Anwar, 2017; Boateng & Gaulee, 2019; Kniveton, 2004). This is not only common in international communities, but also in Ghana where studies have found that parental influence is a key variable in understanding the career choices of children (Akyina, Oduro-Okyireh, & Osei-Owusu, 2014; Ankoma-Sey, Quansah, & Nsoh, 2019a; Quansah, Ankoma-Sey, & Dankyi, 2020). In worst cases, parents are found to force their children to go into vocations and careers without considering the abilities and interests with the aim of protecting the family name and taking after their parents (Akyina et al., 2014).

Several studies have been conducted related to issues concerning pupils' choice of courses of study (see Akyina et al., 2014; Amoah, Kwofie, & Baiden, 2015; Korkmaz, 2015; Pascual, 2014; Preez, 2018; Zare-ee & Shekarey, 2010). For most of these studies, the emphasis was placed on the assessment of factors influencing the choice of technical courses (see Ankoma-Sey, Nsoh, & Quansah, 2019b; Zare-ee & Shekarey, 2010), Home Economics (see Ankoma-Sey et al., 2019b), and career choices (see Amoah, 2015; Pascual, 2014; Quansah et al., 2020). It was only Akyina et al. (2014), and Jafari and Aliesmaili (2013) who examined the factors SHS final year students considered in choosing a course to study in the university.

While these studies are similar, especially that of Akyina et al. (2014), and Jafari and Aliesmaili (2013), their findings may not apply to this study for two major reasons. First, final

year SHS students (grade 12), as compared to final year JHS pupils (grade 9), are relatively mature and more enlightened to choose a course and career path. As a result, they may be in a better position to make a fairly good decision concerning which course and career path to pursue with little guidance. Second, courses in the SHS are more specific to a particular career pathway and, for that matter, persons who find themselves in grade 12 have already aligned themselves to a specific career path. In that sense, it becomes relatively easy for such persons to choose a course to pursue at the tertiary level. For example, a student who reads the General Arts course in SHS may choose university courses that are related to the General Arts course. Such a student in Ghana cannot choose to read Bachelor of Medicine because he/she would not be qualified. Only students who read science-related courses can pursue science-related courses at the tertiary education level.

This study, unlike previous studies, examines the challenges grade 9 pupils face when choosing a course to study at the SHS level. The main thrust of this research was to understand the social milieu of the pupils and how the actors in this social environment serve as a challenge to the pupils' decisions on course selection. Particularly, this study examined how: (1) agents from the home setting present challenges for the pupils in selecting a course to study at the SHS level; and (2) actors from the school environment serve as a challenge to the grade 9 pupils in selecting their preferred course.

The findings of this research are relevant to grade 9 pupils, teachers/counsellors, and educational policymakers. By unravelling the challenges pupils face, pupils will understand and be aware of these agents who pose challenges to them. This will enable them to act accordingly in terms of present and future decisions regarding the choices they make for further studies. Teachers, counsellors or headteachers may not be conscious of some of these problems faced by the pupils in the selection process. With this knowledge, these stakeholders would be aware and subsequently, help the pupils to overcome these challenges. Teachers will also be careful about how to guide pupils in their selection decision. Additionally, parents will also be informed on how to cautiously guide their wards considering the child's interest. This study will help parents to understand how their guidance in the selection process can contribute positively or negatively to the child's decision. Furthermore, educational policymakers such as Ghana Education Service (GES) will understand the problems the pupils face so that intervention programmes can be developed for both the pupils and teachers to ensure that better choices are made.

1.1 The choice of SHS courses in Ghana and the context of the study

The education system in Ghana has made education obligatory and comprises 6 years of primary school and 3 years of JHS. This was the concept under the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy of Ghana and formed part of the effort of the government to fulfil the millennium development goal on education (Quainoo, Quansah, Adams, & Opoku, 2020). After completing basic education, pupils are required to write a final external examination called Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) organised by the West African Examination Council (WAEC). Pupils who sat for BECE compete for enrollment to SHS after they have selected their preferred schools and the corresponding course they wish to pursue. The courses to be selected include General Arts, Technical, Visual Arts, Business, Home Economics, Science and Agriculture. These courses have their specific elective subjects and general subjects which include Core Mathematics, English Language, Social Studies and Integrated Science. In 2005, a Computerized School Placement System (CSPS) was introduced to centralize and consolidate the SHS admission process. The computerized system distributed JHS pupils to the various SHS depending on pupils' desired courses and their academic achievements in the BECE (Ajayi, 2012). To date, this CSPS is used for the selection and placement of grade 9 pupils in the country.

This study was conducted among grade 9 pupils in JHS in the La Nkwantanang-Madina Municipality right after they had completed their selection of schools and courses. Just like in any other basic school in Ghana, grade 9 pupils in La Nkwantanang-Madina Municipality also select their preferred schools and courses they wish to pursue. This municipality was selected because the researchers had experienced the difficulties the grade 9 pupils within the municipality encountered during the school and/or course selection process. The municipality is predominately rural settlements where most of the inhabitants did not have a tertiary education qualification. Anecdotal evidence from the researchers in the La Nkwantanang-Madina Municipality (i.e., the study context) showed that the majority of the pupils were very naïve with regards to what goes into a particular SHS course, and how this shaped their career path. This usually led to frustration and had become an annual phenomenon experienced by the grade 9 pupils. This prompted the conduct of this study.

1.2 Social Cognitive Career Theory

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) was developed based on Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory. The SCCT highlights the inter-relationship among environmental, individual, and behavioural elements that are presumed to influence one's career and academic choices (Lent & Brown, 2006). Key issues raised in the framework of the theory were self-efficacy, interests, beliefs, environmental supports, outcome expectations and choice actions (Lent, Sheu, Gloster, & Wilkins, 2010). In studying grade 9 pupils' choice of courses in SHS and its related issues, SCCT provides a suitable theoretical lens (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

The theory has been employed in some studies associated with people's intentions to choose courses in several fields (e.g., Byars-Winston, Estrada, Howard, Davis, & Zalapa, 2010; Lent, Lopez, Lopez, & Sheu, 2008). SCCT postulates that the will-power to produce a specific choice can be described as a function of goals and interests. Meanwhile, interest in a particular course is related to learning experiences and self-reference confidence. Given the central significance of initial experience in the various subjects in the JHS (Marshall, McGee, McLaren, & Veal, 2011), intentions to choose a particular course can be said to be a function of motivation and learning related subjects at the basic education level.

According to Pajares and Kranzler (1995), intentions to choose specific courses are related to previous academic achievement and self-efficacy beliefs. Other studies also mentioned pupils' attitudes towards related subjects as key drivers to their choice of preferred course (Trusty, 2002; Eccles, 1994). SCCT stresses the role of ecological barriers and supports the determination of the choice. In the pre-tertiary education context, pupils' decision to pursue specific courses is a response to the situational supports and barriers—academic, financial, or social. Pupils' transition to the SHS requires several demands including the need for financial resources, mastery over course area, and numerous external difficulties. The product of this process may exhibit either blockades or supports and consequently influence pupils' choice of courses in SHS education.

Based on the review (see Akyina et al., 2014; Amoah et al., 2015; Bandura, 1986; Korkmaz, 2015; Lent et al., 2010; Pascual, 2014; Preez, 2018; Zare-ee & Shekarey, 2010), a framework was developed by the authors to depict how agents in the social milieu possess a challenge to the grade 9 pupil. The authors named the framework the 'social web' in which the child finds him/herself during the decision-making process.

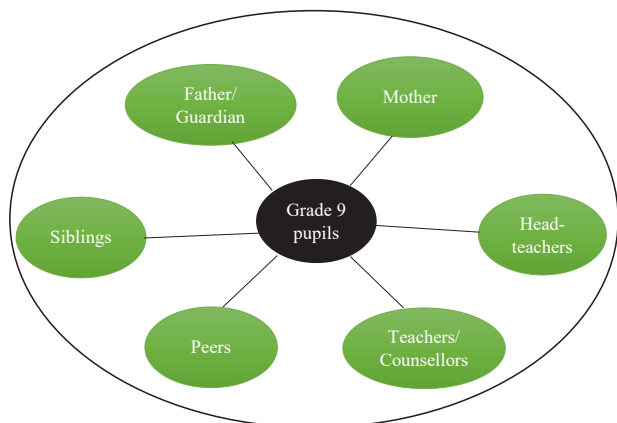


Figure 1: Framework showing how grade 9 pupils are trapped in their social environment.
Source: Authors' construct

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

The explanatory sequential design was employed as the design for this study. The explanatory sequential design is a form of mixed design where the investigator starts by carrying out a quantitative investigation and follows up on some selected results using a qualitative approach to explain the results from the quantitative phase. The reason for the implementation of the qualitative inquiry is to clarify the earlier quantitative results in detail (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Due to the adoption of this design, the methods of this study went through three phases: (1) Quantitative, (2) Qualitative, and (3) Integration.

2.2 Phase I: Quantitative Stage

The quantitative stage involved grade 9 pupils and their teachers/counsellors. This phase started with the sampling of an initial large sample of pupils and teachers/counsellors from the schools in the La Nkwantanang-Madina Municipality. The grade 9 pupils in the municipality were 8,418 and the teachers/counsellors were 117. It must be indicated that every person who acted as a counsellor was a teacher handling one or two subjects.

First, the cluster sampling procedure was employed to select 10 schools (see Table 1) from the 56 schools. Afterwards, 368 pupils were sampled through a systematic sampling procedure. This sample size was based on the assertion of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) that for a population between 8,000 and 9,000, a sample size of

Table 1: Population of grade 9 pupils in the 10 selected schools and their respective sample.

No.	Selected schools	Population (Grade 9)	Sample
1.	Baba Yara M/A 3	121	29
2.	Madina Estate M/A	151	36
3.	Umar Bun Hatab	127	30
4.	Madina Islamic	150	36
5.	Pantang D/A	188	45
6.	Nkwantanang M/A	144	34
7.	Teiman St. James Anglican	172	41
8.	St. Andrews 2	213	51
9.	Kweiman D/A	94	22
10.	St. Andrews 5	187	44
	Total	1,547	368

368 is deemed adequate and sufficient to generalise. For the teachers/counsellors, all 117 of them were sampled to participate in the research. The census approach was utilised in involving all of them (Creswell, 2012).

Two forms of questionnaires were developed, validated, and used for data collection during the quantitative phase. The first form of the questionnaire was administered to pupils whereas teachers/counsellors were administered the second form. Both questionnaires were pre-tested in Kpone Bawaleshie and Akodzo JHS in the Tema Metropolis in the Greater Accra Region by presenting them to 50 grade 9 pupils and 20 teachers. The two schools were selected for the pilot-testing because they had similar characteristics (in terms of school enrolment, performance in BECE, and literacy rates) with the schools in the La Nkwantanang-Madina municipality (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018). The responses were critically examined. Comments raised by the respondents in the comment section provided on the questionnaires were adequately addressed. Using the Kuder-Richardson 21 reliability procedure, the pupil's questionnaire yielded a coefficient of .83 and that of the teachers yielded a coefficient of .72 (Quansah, 2017).

Clearance for data collection was provided by the College of Distance Education, the University of Cape Coast with reference number CoDE/GCP/GA/011. Other ethical issues considered were informed consent provided by parents of grade 9 pupils, assent by the grade 9 pupils, confidentiality, anonymity, protection of respondents from psychological harm, and protection of vulnerable participants.

For the pupils who were involved at this stage, 316 out of 368 questionnaires were valid for data analysis which corresponded to a response rate of 85.9%. The males were 209 (66%) whereas 107 (34%) were females. The majority of the pupils were between the ages of 16 and 22 ($n=212$, 67.1%). For the teachers/counsellors, 100 (68% males and 32% females) out of 117 valid questionnaires were obtained which corresponded to a response rate of 85.5%. The quantitative data obtained from pupils and teachers/counsellors were analysed using frequencies, percentages and chi-square test of association.

2.3 Phase II: Qualitative Stage

This phase began after the data from the quantitative stage had been analysed. The purpose of this stage was to identify specific results from the quantitative phase which called for further clarification and these results were used to direct the implementation of the qualitative part (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Thence, 12 pupils and 8 teachers/counsellors were selected to provide detailed information on the quantitative data. To sample the 12 pupils and 8 teachers/counsellors for the follow up qualitative study, a more systematic approach was employed by using the quantitative results to guide the selection of the respondents who are in the best position to clarify the quantitative data. This technique required that data should be available on the specific responses of specific participants in the quantitative sample.

Unstructured interviews were conducted using an interview guide as the follow-up data collection instrument. The interview guide allowed for probing and respondents expressing themselves freely and not being restricted to some specific responses as in the case of a questionnaire (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008).

The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The participants were given pseudonyms (such as Kelli, Pollre, Hempey, etc.) for easy identification. For the pupils, the pseudonyms were Xerk, Ylowt, Wiplot, Diale, Zacki, Jupita, Silow, Kayr, Pieror, Jaina, Barbhs, and Nhatan. The teachers/counsellors were given the following authored names: Zori, Jayru, Poala, Itaryt, Quatey, Yirue, Erame, Shaloe, Uyirew, and Bonoro. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis adopting the approach by Braun and Clark (2006). A 100% response rate was achieved for both pupils and teachers/counsellors interviewed.

2.4 Phase III: Data Integration Stage

The point of integration is the point at which quantitative data meets the qualitative strand. For this study, the point of data integration is at the data analysis. That is, it is at the data analysis level which the two data strands were merged. Unlike the first two stages, this phase only focuses on the analysis. Thus, there is no sample, sampling procedure or instrument. The quantitative results are presented first, then buttressed with the qualitative data to get a complete understanding of the issue under investigation.

3 Results

3.1 Challenges from the Home Setting Faced by Grade 9 Pupils when Selecting a Course to Pursue at the SHS Level

This research examined the challenges grade 9 pupils faced from the home setting when choosing a course to pursue at the SHS. Data on this research objective were obtained from both pupils and teachers/counsellors. A series of chi-square tests was performed to explore the possible associations between the home variables. Since several previous studies have found the father as the greatest influence (Acheampong, 2014; Awan, Sarwar, Mehdi, Noureen, & Anwar, 2017; Boateng & Gaulee, 2019; Kniveton, 2004), the variable “*My father influenced me to select his preferred course*” was used to used against all the other home factors to understand how the fathers’ general influence was associated with the other home factors. The details of the results are presented in Tables 2 (for pupils) and 3 (for teachers/counsellors).

The results, as presented in Table 2, showed a significant association between the father’s influence on the pupil’s choice of course and other home factors. For example, the father’s influence was associated with the mother’s influence of the choice of course [$\chi^2=73.31$, $p<.001$] and sibling’s influence [$\chi^2=7.78$, $p=.005$]. The father’s influence was also significantly associated with the parents’ belief that some courses are for only males or females [$\chi^2=8.59$, $p=.008$], and the family finance levels [$\chi^2=151.62$, $p<.001$].

Among the responses, it was found that the fathers influenced their wards in selecting a course (94%) (see Table 2). The majority of the pupils indicated that their fathers failed to consider the course they were interested in (50.9%) and thus, their fathers did not give them the

Table 2: Challenges Grade 9 Pupils faced at Home in Selecting a Course (n=316).

Indicators	YES	NO	χ^2	df	p-value	Phi
	Freq(%)	Freq(%)				
My father influenced me to select his preferred course	299(94.6)	17(5.4)	--	--	--	--
My father considered the course I preferred to do	155(49.1)	161(50.9)	28.39	1	.000*	-.174
My father gave me the chance to select a course of my choice	143(45.3)	173(54.7)	15.42	1	.020*	-.176
My mother influenced me to select her preferred course	120(38.0)	196(62.0)	73.31	1	.000*	-.280
My mother considered the course I preferred to do	189(59.8)	127(40.2)	13.24	1	.000*	-.219
My mother gave me the chance to select a course of my choice	163(51.6)	153(48.4)	4.35	1	.037*	-.268
My siblings influenced me to choose a specific course	213(67.4)	103(32.6)	7.78	1	.005*	.191
I had disagreements with my siblings on the choice of my course	248(78.5)	68(21.5)	1.05	1	.307	.033
My siblings agreed with me to select a course of my choice	117(37.0)	199(63.0)	.066	1	.797	-.006
My friends at home influenced me to select a particular course	42(13.3)	274(86.7)	2.06	1	.151	-.047
I believe that some SHS courses are for only males or females	198(62.7)	118(37.3)	.842	1	.359	.030
My parents believe that some SHS courses are for only males or females	211(66.8)	105(30.7)	8.59	1	.008*	.162
The level of my parent’s finances made me choose a particular course	219(69.3)	97(30.7)	151.62	1	.000*	.403
There are some courses I cannot do because of finances	203(64.2)	113(35.8)	4.40	1	.036*	.269

*Significant at $p < .05$

chance to make their own choice (54%). A follow-up interview was conducted on the role the fathers play which serves as a challenge to the selection of their courses. The interviews confirmed how the fathers tried to influence their wards against their will. In an interview, one of the pupils said:

When I was choosing a school and course, my dad took charge and did everything without my consent. I had earlier thought of a course to choose but he says I don't know anything about secondary education. He told me he wants the best for (Excerpt from Xerk)

In Xerk’s view, the father is seen to force the child to choose a course against what he originally decided to choose. Xerk’s statement suggested that he just had to accept the decision to choose a particular course to please the father. A similar instance was seen in the case of other pupils who were interviewed. One of the pupils, for example, said:

At first, I did the selection of schools and courses myself with the help of my mother because my father had travelled. Errmmm... upon his return he came to my school and did the selection all

over again after my mother informed him of what we have done (Excerpt from Ylowt)

Another pupil indicated that:

My father discussed with me that I have to do the science course because none of my siblings did science. And since I am the last born, he advised me to do the course. I just have to agree to it even though I preferred the General Art course (Excerpt from Wiplot)

Also, Dialely said:

As for Mr. Appiah, hmmm..., he always wants his children to do things he did. He sometimes says ‘I (i.e. the father) attended a boys school, so my male children go to a male school. The last time we talked about the course to read in SHS, he told me that he read science and he is now an engineer and he wants me to follow his path (Excerpt from Dialely)

From the excerpts of Ylowt, Wiplot, and Dialely, the influences of the fathers were obvious. The fathers predominately decided what course the child should do. In some instances, the child was seen as someone who did

not know what was best for them. In the case of Wiplot and Diale, the fathers indirectly coerced their children to follow their career paths. This, however, appeared not to be the case for the mothers. The results, in Table 2, revealed that a greater proportion of the pupils indicated that their mother did have little influence on the selection of their course (62%), considers their children's decision (59.8%), and gave their children the chance to select their course (51.6%). Investigating these responses, it appeared that the mothers were not much of a problem with the choice of their children except only when their husbands convinced them. This was supported by the results from the chi-square test which found a significant association between the influences from mothers and fathers. Most of the mothers could not disagree with the fathers and tended to rather align themselves to the father's decision. The following are some excerpts from the follow-up interviews conducted:

...for my mother, she is fine with any choice I make. She will definitely support any course I want to read. Although she is sometimes convinced by my father to side with him (Excerpt from Zacki)

My mother does not have any problem with whatever I want to do. I remember telling her I wanted to be a fashion designer, she was like 'my dear, if this will make you happy and a better person, I will pray for you. My dad, however, rubbished all those ideas. So, my mother accepts any decision I make (Excerpt from Ylowt)

...when I say I want this or that, all that I have to do is to explain and convince my mom. If I can get her, then we (i.e., my mom and I) will try to convince my dad since he is a difficult person unlike my mom (Excerpt from Jupita)

Further results also indicated that siblings influenced pupils' choice of a specific course to pursue (67.4%). According to the pupils, they encountered some disagreements with their siblings on the choice of their course (78.5%). In most cases, there were no agreements between the pupils and their siblings on the course to choose (63%). In addition, the qualitative data revealed how siblings served as a challenge to the pupils in making their course decision. In some instances, older siblings forced the younger siblings to select a course against their wish. Other siblings too encouraged their sisters/brothers to select a course that these siblings have read. Some of the excerpts are:

A senior sister of mine told me to choose the Home Economics course because it is a good course for me. She told me about several benefits of reading the course. I think she was able to influence me, so that is the course I selected (Excerpt from Nhatan)

Another respondent said:

My siblings kept confusing me on the course I should choose in secondary education. One said that none of my siblings have read General Arts course, so I should select the course so that the family will have all persons in all the courses (Excerpt from Barbhs)

In another case, Jaina said:

Each of my sisters would want me to decide on a course they read in SHS. The one who did science says I should do science; the other who did General Arts says I should enrol in the area and the third who read Business is also telling me to select the Business course (Excerpt from Jaina)

A larger proportion of the pupils believed that some SHS courses are for males or females (62.7%). Furthermore, the respondents postulated that their parents also believed that some SHS courses are for males or females (66.8%). The data from the interviews conducted revealed that the pupils had been oriented with some stereotypical thinking that some courses like Home Economics are for females, whereas a course like Visual Arts is for males. A respondent voiced:

I had an interest in cooking at home and I did virtually even all the kitchen jobs at home although I have female siblings. I, one day, jokingly told my parents that I will read Home Economics. I remember my parents telling me that this course is for females and that I should not even think of pursuing a course in Home Economics (Excerpt from Kayr)

In another interview, Pieror said:

At home, my siblings and I have been made aware by our parents of which jobs best fit males and those that best-fit females. He (my father) will normally say, Kwabena should be a medical doctor, Kwadwo will be an engineer, Ama will do foodstuffs...(the respondent smiling) because Ama likes cooking (Excerpt from Pieror)

The findings of this study, as shown in Table 2, again found that the financial level of parents influenced their wards in choosing a course (69.3%). Coupled with this, the respondents averred that there are some courses they couldn't select because of financial issues at home (64%). This suggests that finance was a key determinant to the choice of a course. This issue was raised by the pupils who were interviewed by sharing how their financial status prevented them from selecting their preferred course. The following are some of the excerpts from the pupils when they narrated their ordeal:

I know and was also informed by my father, that science and home economics course usually demand more money because of the practicals. He just advised me to pick a course that he can take care of (Excerpt from Diale)

I told my parents I wanted to read Visual Arts. He replied that his friend's son is doing the same course and according to the friend, the cost involved in the course is too much so I should pick a reading course (Excerpt from Wiplot)

I had numerous challenges with finances going to school to this stage and so my father decided that I should pick a school close to the home and a course that will not demand a lot of money. I called my Uncle to guide me with this decision. So he finally assisted me (Excerpt from Silow)

I'm coming from a poor home so I don't even know whether I can go to secondary school. I don't think my parents can afford that. I have planned with my father and mother to learn a trade after school. But I have selected some schools and courses (Excerpt from Nhatan)

The excerpts showed that the financial status of parents is a challenge the JHS pupils face in choosing a course of study in SHS. Most of the pupils commented that they could not select their preferred course because they perceived or were informed that the cost associated with their preferred course was high. It was also observed that guardians/parents (especially the father) were not willing to allow their children choice courses with high cost because they felt they could not afford the cost involved.

Further responses were obtained from teachers/counsellors. First, the teachers/counsellors were asked to identify, from their experiences, the agents at homes of pupils who serve as a challenge to the child's selection of a course. The details of the analysis are shown in Table 3.

The teachers/counsellors indicated that fathers were the greatest challenge to the child in choosing a course (34.1%) (see Table 3). This was followed by mothers (16.9%) and siblings (12.2%). These three agents were listed as persons who interfered with the decision-making process of the child and in some cases, this interference leads to conflicts. Other agents of influence who interfered with the child's selection of course were uncles, aunts, media, friends, and other elderly persons. In a follow-up interview, a teacher who doubles as a counsellor with 15 years of experience, said:

Some parents force their wards to do certain courses. We have one boy who was forced to select the General Science course even though he insisted on picking the Home Economics course. This boy is now performing poorly in school (Excerpt from Madam Zori)

Table 3: Responses from Teachers/Counsellors on Home Challenges Pupils Face in Course Selection.

Agents at Home	N	Percent	Ranks
Father	87	34.1	1 st
Mother	43	16.9	2 nd
Siblings	31	12.2	3 rd
Uncles	29	11.4	4 th
Aunties	20	7.8	5 th
Media (TV/Radio) at home	16	6.3	6 th
Elderly persons (no relations)	12	4.7	7 th
Friends	12	4.7	8 th
Religious leaders at home	5	2.0	9 th
Total	255*	100.0	--

*Multiple responses (n=100)

Another participant, with 8 years experience, reiterated that:

Some parents really give us a headache when they are supposed to pick a course for their ward. In some cases, you see a parent select a course, say, General Art when such a child is opting for the Home Economics course. Sometimes, the mothers don't even have a say, let alone a teacher, a counsellor or headteacher (Excerpt from Poala)

Other participants shared a similar concern:

...As a teacher, you can identify a child who from all indications, like the performance in school, can do well in a Technical course. If you try to suggest this to the child, family relatives will prevent the child from selecting such a course. All that you hear is that their child cannot do Technical course because that course is for pupils with low achievement (Excerpt from Itearyt)

For me, I blame the kind of media we have nowadays. They paint a picture of some courses as though such courses are for pupils who do not perform well in school. The information we share on these media platforms communicates the information that some career paths are not worth choosing (Excerpt from Quatey).

3.2 Challenges from the School Setting Faced by Grade 9 Pupils when Selecting a Course to Pursue at the SHS Level

This research sought to highlight the challenges of grade 9 pupils in the school settings when selecting a course to pursue at the SHS level. Data were obtained from the pupils only since the teachers/counsellors are likely to be

Table 4: School Challenges Pupils face in the Selection of Courses.

School Challenges	Frequency	Percent
Teachers/counsellors	391	33.9
Headteachers	328	28.5
Peers in schools	226	19.6
Performance in schools	207	18.0
Total	1152*	100.0

*Multiple responses ($n=316$)

biased when reporting on the challenges from the school setting. Table 4 presents the responses of the respondents during the quantitative phase.

As presented in Table 4, teacher/counsellor (33.9%) and headteacher (28.5%) interference were found to be the major challenges pupils faced in selecting a course to pursue at the SHS level. A follow-up from the interview revealed that these agents (i.e. teachers/counsellors/headteachers) do their subjective evaluation of pupils and try to influence them to choose a particular course. Some teachers/counsellor based their evaluation on the performance of pupils. Some excerpts are:

My English teacher said I should pick the General Arts course which I did not like. She told me the benefits of doing General Arts. She added that since I am good at English language subjects. I refused and selected the business course which my parents agreed to. From then, she has been cold towards me (Excerpt from Kayr)

I initially thought of choosing the Science course but my teacher discouraged me and advised me to pick Visual Art. He said I cannot perform well if I pick Science because I am not a good student. He later said since I am good at drawing (Excerpt from Jaina)

A similar concern was raised by other interviewees:

I had a passion for the Home Economics course in SHS. My teachers laughed at me! They said am funny. Most of the teachers advised me to do the Science or Business course since I am good at mathematics. I went home to inform my parents and they were ok (Excerpts from Barbs)

After agreeing with my parents to select Agricultural science course, I was called by my headteacher together with other teachers to bring my father to school the next day. On the next day, I brought my father and I was told to excuse them. After some time, they called for me and told me Visual Arts has been selected for me. I was not happy! (Excerpt from Jupita)

The results, as shown in Table 4, again showed that peers in schools (19.6%) serve as a challenge for pupils

in choosing a course. From the interviews, it appears that peers stigmatised and influenced their colleagues in selecting a specific course. Excerpts from the various interviews conducted were:

My friends and I had long decided to select the science course... (smiling)...We all wanted to do the same course and pick the same schools so that we can keep our friendship for such a long time. We have come to be a family now (Excerpt from Kayr)

I remember the day I told my friends that I wanted to do the Home Economics course in senior high, they laughed at me 'papaa'. Some even insulted me for saying that because I was a male. I just kept quiet and decided to think about a different course (Excerpt from Barbhs)

In the case of one participant, he concealed the course that he had selected from his friend for fear that he will be teased. Perhaps, his friends held several perceptions regarding the courses offered at the SHS.

I have not been able to tell my friends about the course I selected. I know them! They will look at me with 'some eyes'; I think they might not like the course but that is the course my parents and I have decided on. I selected Visual Arts. That is what I want, you see, my friends all want the business (Excerpt from Pieror)

Results, as shown in Table 4, further revealed that pupils' performance in schools was also a challenge to pupils in the selection of the course to pursue (18%). Data from the interviews conducted revealed that the pupils largely considered their performance before they made a choice. The understanding is that there were some subjects in the JHS which were related to the courses offered at the SHS. The data showed that when pupils had difficulties in a subject, say Mathematics, they would hesitate to choose a mathematics-related course in the SHS. One of the participants, for instance, said:

...yess! I looked at my performance in school for some subjects before agreeing to choose the Business course. I have a passion for journalism so I wanted to do General Arts but I also knew that I was not excellent in the English Language subject. I'm an average student in English (Excerpt from Xerk)

In another situation, a participant voiced:

I admire medical doctors but am afraid of elective mathematics. Even the mathematics we do here (JHS) that they say is not difficult, I struggle with it. With that, I couldn't select the Science course! I talked to my parents and we agreed on the General Arts. I'm ok! (Excerpt from Silow)

A similar ordeal was shared by other participants regarding the consideration of performance as a criterion

for the selection of a course in SHS. The following are some of the excerpts:

.....our teachers, especially, would want to compare your performance in specific subjects to see if it will match. For instance, one teacher advised me that since I am good at science and mathematics, I should do Science in SHS even though I wanted to do General Arts. Upon thinking through I understood that since I wasn't too good in English subject, I may not do well on General Arts (Excerpt from Ylowt)

I am a person I don't like reading subjects. I rather enjoy calculation subjects. Although my role model is a journalist and wished to become one, I had to go in for the one I will do and do very well if I go to SHS (Excerpt from Dialej)

3.3 Other Findings from the Interviews

Due to the unstructured nature of the interviews conducted, other interesting issues came up during the interviews. It was found that the interviewees (pupils) did not have in mind a preferred course. Again, most of the interviewees indicated that they left the decision of selecting a course to their parents or guardian. The result suggests that there is an element of indecisiveness among the pupils. This was further investigated in a follow-up interview where the issue of indecisiveness became obvious. Some interviewees did not even have an idea of the career path they intended to choose let alone to know what course to pursue. One interviewee stated:

I didn't know which school and course to select. My teacher will say select A, my mother will say "No", do this and daddy too will be saying another thing. But honestly, I was confused about what selection to make (Excerpt from Barbhs))

In some instances, the pupils were found torn between several decisions to make. Unlike the earlier respondent (i.e. Barbhs), Zacki had several options to choose from but the problem was difficulty in choosing a specific option. In Zacki's own words:

...Yes! Yes! (Nodding the head in affirmative), at first, I wanted to read the Visual Arts course, I then decided again that I will select a school that has the technical course. But I finally settled on General Arts...I don't know but I just felt like changing courses (Excerpt from Zacki)

Other pupils chose to do any course which comes to mind or even to select a course at random. No reasons were ascribed to such decisions but rather based on intuition. An interviewee with the pseudonym Silow recounted her ordeal

I was confused about what course and even the school to select. But I thought and I selected any of them at random. Myself, I don't know what career I want to go into in future. In the end, I selected General Art because they said that one broad (Excerpts from Silow)

It appeared the pupils had low self-confidence in excelling on the course they have selected. This is an issue of self-confidence and, perhaps, there was low self-confidence because a greater percentage of the pupils did not select a course, they have an interest in and preferred. The interviews conducted further revealed that the pupils held certain beliefs about some courses and this shaped the way they looked at such a course. Some interviewees made this evident in the interviews conducted:

I have heard that the science course in SHS is very difficult. The way people say it, I think I cannot do it. So, I selected the home economics course, at least I am a female and I like cooking so I think I can do it (Excerpt from Xerk)

When my school called for the selection of schools and courses, my father said I should pick a science course. I didn't agree with him because I was afraid that I could not successfully do the science course. Our teachers have been saying that the science course in secondary school is not easy (Excerpt from Jaina)

In one of the interviewees, it was apparent that the issue of indecisiveness could also lead to low self-confidence. That is, not entirely knowing what to choose will end up in having a little belief that you will excel in the course finally chosen. This is because the choice of a course finally may have been influenced by other things. The participant reiterated that:

Honestly, I had nothing in mind to choose from. I was not able to make my own choice because I was always asking myself that 'Will I be able to do this course if I pick it? Sometimes, I was anxious about whether I could excel in the course (Excerpt from Pieror)

In the interview sessions, the teachers/counsellors stated that the pupils were not greatly decisive on what course to do (85%) or even the career path to follow (56%). In addition, the teachers/counsellors indicated that a few pupils were firm on their decision (42%). Some of the interviewees said:

In class, sometimes I ask the pupils what they want to do in the future. Can you imagine some do not even know who they want to be? You see these pupils struggling to decide which course they would want to pursue at the SHS (Excerpt from Shaloe)

I would say that some pupils have passion and interest in a particular field but they are afraid of choosing such a course

because of what people say about the course. The impression is that the General Science course is difficult whereas the Home Economics course is difficult (Excerpt from Yirus)

4 Discussion

The results from this research revealed that challenges that emanated from the home in final year pupils' choice of course in SHS were interferences from the fathers, mothers and siblings, low financial status of parents and stereotypical orientation of pupils at home. The results found a significant association between the father's decision and other home variables (like mother's influence, family finance levels, sibling's influence), indicating the critical role of the fathers. In Ghanaian society, the father is deemed as the leader of the family. As such the majority of the decisions made concerning the home and the children are spearheaded by fathers. This result portrays the dominance of fathers in the career decisions of their children. This probably might be as a result of the father taking care of the children in school. The mothers are always oriented to be washing, cooking and taking care of the home whereas fathers are been made to believe that they have to toil and provide for the family. Previous studies have averred that fathers play a critical role in decisions concerning their children (e.g., Acheampong, 2014; Awan et al., 2017; Ankoma-Sey et al., 2019a; Boateng & Gaulee, 2019; Herrera & Hurtado, 2011; Quansah et al., 2020).

Parents and siblings also indirectly indoctrinated children to think that some courses are meant for some category of persons. In this study, for example, stereotypical thinking was found as a challenge the pupils faced in selecting a course to pursue. This finding is supported by Ode et al.'s (2013) study which found that parents discouraged their wards from choosing the Home Economics course. The study revealed that the pupils were indecisive and had low self-confidence when selecting a course to pursue at the SHS. This seems to be the immediate or short-term effect of varied advice received from agents from the home or perhaps from the school. This finding supports the findings of Marshall et al. (2011) and Quansah et al. (2019a) who discovered these two constructs as critical for a better choice to be made.

The study revealed that peers, teacher/counsellor and headteacher interference also served as a major challenge the grade 9 pupils faced in selecting a course to pursue at the SHS. This finding is consistent with research by Ankoma-Sey et al. (2019a) which revealed that JHS teachers influence pupils' enrolment in the Home

Economic course. In school, peers are the immediate social influence outside the family in which the child gain recognition and acceptance. Amid their cohorts, children form associations and discuss issues that older persons may not share with them, like fashion and secular music, sex and drugs (Eyiah-Bediako, Quansah, Omotosho, & Hagan, 2021). It is not surprising that such peers influence the choice of their colleagues in selecting a course in SHS (e.g., Navin, 2009; Palos & Drobot, 2010).

The study further revealed that pupils' performance in schools was a challenge to pupils in the selection of the course to pursue. This study is consistent with that of Jackson (2015) who found that performance in examination is used as the basis for which JHS pupils progress to SHS and this further influences their course to choose is Ghana. Perhaps, this may be the reason why the teachers and pupils themselves do some evaluation of pupils' performance before they choose a particular course.

The findings of this study validate the main idea of the SCCT which highlights the inter-connection among certain environmental factors that are presumed to influence one's career and academic choice (Lent & Brown, 2006). A host of factors or challenges were found to influence the choice of grade 9 pupils. Consistent with the key premise of the SCCT, these challenges were largely environmental which included interferences from fathers, mothers, siblings, teachers, school counsellors, and peers.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study identified specific challenges that affected grade 9 pupils when choosing SHS courses. It is important to state that pupils struggled to decide on what career path to pursue and which course to read in SHS. Consequently, they are found 'caught up in the web' of several pieces of advice, influences and interferences from the school and home. It appears that these challenges are inevitable but can only be managed. This is because the child, when born, is placed in a social environment where several interactions go on. Once the child goes to school, another society is created and, in our view, the interactions around this social milieu create a particular psychological dilemma for the child. That is why issues of indecisiveness, stereotypical thinking and low self-confidence were found as the effects experienced by the pupils. The father, mother, siblings, coupled with the ability of their parents to get money to pay their fees, interference from other family members and teachers are all challenges pupils

face in making an effective decision on the specific course to choose. The choice between pupils' interests and what parents wish for also creates conflicting ideas that become a challenge to the pupils.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that school authorities should give each pupil the chance to meet with a particular teacher who will be considered as a mentor to help identify specific interest areas for them, which help students make the right decision. Organising individual counselling by the counselling department for the pupils to determine their strengths and abilities. This can be done by administering career inventory to find out which area or field these pupils can function effectively. This will help know each person's abilities and which SHS course will fit their abilities. School counselling departments (if any) in various schools should engage both parents and teachers to come to a consensus on what is good for their wards in terms of SHS courses. School counsellors should have open house dialogue for pupils using past students who have gone ahead to advise them. This can help enlighten the pupils on what to consider in deciding on a particular course to select.

It is also recommended that parents and guardians should be enlightened by school heads on the relevance of pupils pursuing their interests rather than the parents imposing courses on them to pursue at the SHS level. Parents should be made aware by school counsellors on how to guide their wards to make a better decision. Parents are not to force their children in making a selection against their will. Parents and teachers should evaluate pupils' opinions in terms of their abilities for appropriate decisions to be made. It is also recommended that Ghana Education Service should provide services on professional career counselling to JHS pupils to help them in selecting the right course that will help them progress successfully in their chosen course.

6 Limitations and Future Direction

The research was conducted in a single municipality within the Greater Accra Region and this consequently, affected the external validity. Therefore, the findings may not largely reflect the challenges of grade 9 pupils (when selecting a course to pursue at SHS) in Ghana. Based on this, it was suggested that future studies should be implemented to cover grade 9 pupils in other regions of the country.

Also, the findings of this research revealed that parents and siblings played a key interference role in terms of the

grade 9 pupils deciding on the SHS course to pursue. However, the views of these agents such as parents were not included in this study. Hence, future research should include the opinions of parents and siblings, and the role they play in the decision-making process of the pupils.

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