

An exploration into the experiences of career provision by students in 21st century Nigeria

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In 2014, illustrative case study research was conducted to examine existing careers guidance interventions available to two young people in different secondary schools in Nigeria. The aim was to explore their perceptions in terms of the subjective usefulness of those interventions in an educational and labour market context within a growing economy. Analysis indicated that as well as access to careers guidance being inconsistent, the experience of the participants was that the existing provision was not sufficient to support them to develop an appreciable degree of independence, and the career management skills required to meet the demands of the 21st century labour market in particular, and life in general.

Introduction

Before discussing the research it will be useful to provide some contextual background. This paper is based on some research for an MA dissertation by a Nigerian student studying at Canterbury Christ Church University and aims to explore the Nigerian context for careers provision in schools and two young people's first hand experiences of it.

The first attempts to universalize primary education in Nigeria began in 1955, at the regional level prior to the independence of Nigeria in 1960 (Labo-Popoola, et al, 2009). Of the three regions in the country at the time, the Western Region had the most successful model, while the Northern Region had the worst outcomes. The latter occurred as the Muslim dominated region rejected the western education introduced into the country, notably by Christian missionaries at the time. Over the years, this appears to have changed as currently there are schools in the Northern region using the stipulated national curriculum which evolved

originally from the British education system. However, recent insurgencies in that region from 2009 until the present time, have been attributed to an extreme Islamist terrorist group purporting to fight against western education in order to uphold Islamic values (Chothia, 2014). This provides some context for the social, cultural and political situation for young people in this region.

The state of ICT usage in Nigeria is also a factor that is worthy of note. There are some limitations ranging from uneven distribution of school computers, insufficient manpower with competence to teach ICT subjects and unreliable power supply among other limitations (Adomi and Kpagban, 2010; Eberendu, 2014). This results in an imbalance in the range and quality of information available to students.

The International Labour Organization suggested a framework for developing globally acceptable career guidance systems in developing countries, taking into account the economic situations of such countries (Hansen, 2006). A key strand of this framework is the understanding of a country's context. This framework might be useful in highlighting possible weaknesses of existing interventions in Nigeria, in relation to significant culturally sensitive factors that might influence the effectiveness of such interventions. The illustration of Northern Nigeria is typical of a situation where differential career theories underpinning any interventions are arguably irrelevant in practice, giving more credibility to approaches that are flexible, interpretive and responsive to the context (Savickas, 2011).

There is also no apparent evidence of explicit career learning in schools. Furthermore the literature shows no evidence of opportunities for young people to tell their stories; how their access to career support or the lack of it affects them, what they think has been useful and how existing provisions could be

improved. Concerns about the preparation of young Nigerian students for unpredictable futures, were the drivers of a need to explore the perspectives of young people themselves and formed the basis of a Masters' dissertation. Using two illustrative case studies, this sought to consider how they had been supported by their respective secondary schools in Nigeria to prepare for uncertain futures.

The specific questions that this research sought to address were:

1. What career guidance support were two young people provided with in their secondary schools?
2. What are their impressions of the usefulness of those interventions, in relation to twenty-first century career development needs?
3. How might career support for young people in Nigerian secondary schools be developed?

A review of literature

Secondary education in Nigeria has two possible aims: to prepare pupils to exit school with the necessary skills to find employment, and/or to prepare them to continue in the academic route of higher education (Moja, 2000). However, in implementing a curriculum designed to meet these purposes Moja (2000: 17) notes that, '...the teachers as implementers never understood the underlying approach'. This has resulted in the failure to produce learners who are well equipped to possess employable skills. Although Moja's overarching focus is the effectiveness of the Nigerian educational sector, he identifies the current status of access to career interventions as a significant element to equip young Nigerians for future work experiences, or failure to do so.

In Nigeria's Third National Development Plan (FME, 2010), the Federal Government acknowledged the significant contributions which career counselling can make to the lives of young people and the nation at large. To this end, it proposed an institutionalization of careers counselling as part of the nation's educational training systems. Although this has been done, a number of factors continue to impede its functional operations (Esere, 2004). In presenting the problems of guidance and counselling, Esere asserts that a negative perception of counselling services among school

leaders, parents, pupils and teachers, is responsible for considering the provision as an auxiliary function in most schools. This may result in guidance practitioners not being respected and developed as professionals and therefore, that young people may not have access to quality career support from them. The question of why there is a negative perception of professionalised careers guidance lies beyond the scope of this work, but remains an important issue.

The role of Information Technology in schools also influences the quality of education and information provided. Eberendu (2014) shows that a small percentage of schools did indeed have competent staffing to deliver ICT in their schools, yet the lack of availability of facilities hinders their performance. This limits some young people especially in state funded schools to a narrow range of information. The quality of career information they can access online may be limited and the skills to use it may not be available. Based on Thompson's (1998) Personal, Cultural and Structural (PCS) levels analysis, which gives a presentation of three interrelated levels of discrimination, the unequal levels of access to online information in secondary schools is another manifestation of the influences and constraints of a structural level of discrimination (Thompson, 2011). This highlights the unequal learning cultures and access to opportunities in some schools across both sectors of education providers. In addition it highlights the limited IT related skills that are able to be developed by many young people and this may also have considerable implications for their career opportunities.

Methodology

The approach to this research was by the use of an illustrative case study. The aim was to explore the first hand experiences of two young people of Nigerian education and the extent to which they felt it had prepared them for their futures. Whilst not looking for generalisations, this work sought to look at the material gained from specific and particular experiences of the participants. Epistemologically qualitative therefore and interpretative in its nature, this study acknowledges the heuristic position of the researcher who had also experienced a Nigerian education and was therefore both subjective and influential in the data.

This method of enquiry provides an account or story told by an individual of a certain event or series of events (Creswell, 2007). Bell (2010) claims that such accounts are usually in chronological order. However this may not always be the case; rather than chronology, the focus is on making meaning of the story by using 'thick descriptions' to show interactions within a context (Geertz, 1973). It provides in-depth details of the opinions, feelings and thoughts of individuals, which is useful for understanding the perceptions of the participants in this research. Their perceptions are considered important because the effectiveness of the interventions they have accessed will to a large extent be determined by their appreciation of those experiences and consequently, their ownership of carrying out the action plans developed from those opportunities. However, it is important to acknowledge that their stories and subjective interpretations of the meanings do not particularly pay attention to ongoing events such as political or economic issues (Yin, 2014), therefore this research method does not offer generalizable conclusions. However it does offer an illumination of real lives in complex situations.

As this study was originally part of an MA dissertation the researcher selected the participants pragmatically in terms of access and availability in the time available. And, although based on the perceptions of these two individuals, insights can be offered into the experience of other young people in similar schools in Nigeria.

Data collection

Conducting semi-structured interviews remotely over Skype was the main approach for collecting data along with consulting documentary information. Through the interview, specific information was obtained to provide answers to the first question by simply identifying specific career guidance interventions that were provided to the young people by the schools they attended. The career guidance activities and processes involved were explored, along with the intended outcomes of those interventions. Obtaining a document from the schools showing the policy for career provisions would have strengthened the credibility of information on what exactly were the specific career guidance activities delivered in the schools. Since this could not be accessed, the study depended on information given by the participants.

The semi-structured nature of the interview provided opportunities for the participants to give detailed account of their perceptions of how the career interventions affected the decisions and transitions they made in school and after completing secondary education. In addition to the evidence provided by participants, reference was made to documentation including an evaluation instrument used for inspection of secondary schools in Nigeria, the International Labour Organisation's framework for careers guidance in low and middle income countries (Hansen, 2006) and other publications on effective careers provision for young people. These documents provide some insight into 'good practice' in careers work.

The semi-structured interview questions were posed in response to the participants' contributions to earlier fact finding conversations with the researcher, although initial questions were similar for both participants. Both interviews were listened to, recorded and were transcribed by hand. The participants were sent the transcripts to read and make corrections if they wanted, before being read a number of times by the researcher to highlight key words and phrases. This allowed themes to be identified and interpretations made of their possible meaning with regard to the research questions.

Findings

Some of the themes identified in the transcripts are highlighted as follows:

Theme 1: Family and social influences on career development.

Both participants acknowledged the influence of their families and their social contexts on the development of their careers. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Udeme: 'One of the greatest, actually one of the greatest impacts on the choice was one of my uncles, that was working in the oil field, so I just picked an interest in that'.

In reference to his early career ideas about chemical engineering, the above statement indicates that his early knowledge about careers was influenced by interactions with a family member who doubled as a

role model, consequently influencing his early career choices.

Ekemini: ‘...And what really helps me here...is because my sister, she did biochemistry too, my second sister, she did biochemistry. So she told me...she gave me the...uhm...the number of courses and most of her text books, I used them. All those, her term papers, her drafts she used to write, so it’s not really difficult for me.’

Theme 2: Influences of structural factors

Another influence observed to have affected the young people’s career development has been the structural factors of the educational sector in the country. The inadequacy of learning resources in the first university Udeme attended, contributed to the difficulty he had in completing the course and a feeling of frustration:

Udeme: ‘So I went into the university to study a course that was lucrative in my field, but maybe because of the educational system in the country, they did not really treat what had to do with my field...’

In Ekemini’s case, her grades were not enough to gain her admission to study medicine in the university of her choice, however, the university considered her for a place to study biochemistry. The reason why this is relevant to this discussion is that Ekemini only considered the biochemistry option when she found out she could not study her first choice course which was medicine, and as a result, she had to take what was available to her at the time:

Ekemini: ‘...so when the list came out, my name wasn’t out on the medical list, so I had to supplement with biochemistry, ‘cause the thought of staying at home was something else, so...I supplemented for biochemistry instead of staying at home and still waiting for medicine’.

This is an example where the university provided her with ‘secondary’ options to choose from, suggesting how the structure of opportunities influence the choices that can be made (Roberts, 1977).

Theme 3: Access to career guidance

In order to identify the kinds of interventions the young people were provided with in their secondary schools, the participants were asked what kind of careers guidance support they accessed while in school. In response, Udeme said, ‘...we knew there was a counsellor but never understood why there was a counsellor, so nobody knew the need of going to see the counsellor. This suggests he did not have a one-to-one interaction with the guidance counsellor in his school.

Findings from Ekemini’s interview data show that she accessed one-to-one career discussions in her junior secondary years and also participated in extracurricular activities that provided her with opportunities for learning and developing skills. Although the extracurricular activities she participated in might not have been designed as a form of explicit careers guidance, they have some semblance of career exploration and workplace learning.

Ekemini: ‘...all those things were broadening our knowledge and it also supported us in our choices... ‘cause you won’t do what you don’t love’ and ‘they just wanted us to have the confidence, you know...that we’ll be able to do it alone.’

The transcripts from both interviews showed that access to explicit career interventions varied between both participants.

Theme 4: Perceptions of the young people

Udeme believed that career guidance would have enabled him to establish links between his self-awareness and the opportunities he could explore;

‘...Now, at that point, career guidance I think would have helped me understand that...it would be easier to obtain knowledge in a field you’re naturally gifted and interested in. So I think that’s the impact career guidance would have had on me. Secondly, I think it would have also shown me the path to tread on, to obtain the goals I have for my future career, the things I have to focus on to attain those goals’.

In addition, his opinion about his lack of guidance can be summed up by the quote below.

'...the lack of it...how did it affect me, it was a blind man just moving in a direction that he felt was right... that's the description I will give because a blind man has the ability to move and thinks where he is going [is] to the right place but until he is given direction... he will not end up in the right place.'

In Ekemini's case, she believed that the guidance she accessed had given her some encouragement to support her career development.

'...I just think everything was okay since there was someone to counsel us...you know, someone you can interact with and tell the things you like with. I just think that was okay because they don't have that in all schools, most of the schools around here, they don't have it'.

Discussion and conclusion

An exploration of the data shows that the contexts of the individuals play a significant role in their career development. Both participants drew either inspiration or valuable information from members of their social networks and their Christian beliefs. However, their social networks could only provide them with information that was limited in both range and quality.

Furthermore, it seems that the participants' original career aspirations did not develop as expected. This may be indicative of the poor preparation these young people received for a complex and demanding national and global labour market. This study seems to indicate that these, and perhaps other young Nigerians are not receiving adequate preparation for the 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) that will face them in the future. This term expresses the way in which society, and in this context specifically the labour market, is in a constant state of flux; people and their lives having to respond just as liquid takes the shape of a container. The structures that have long provided stability and some prediction of the future have changed or become less powerful such as family, the State, the work place and in some countries the Church. The question of whether young people are being prepared for such fluidity is at the heart of this research. This work has

shown from interactions with the participants, that the provision of proactive interventions for students does not appear to be a top priority for the schools they attended. Consequently their ability to provide quality guidance interventions is questionable. The claim is founded on the perceived inadequacy of timely and intentional efforts to ensure that students developed the awareness and career management skills which are relevant to their current and future needs.

Furthermore both participants, based on their experiences, acknowledged careers guidance as a potentially useful intervention for young people. This does not concur with Esere's (2004) assertion that a range of stakeholders including young people have a poor perception of counselling in schools. These young people valued and welcomed such interventions but simply did not have adequate understanding of the service or access to available help.

Evidence given by one of the participants suggests that the current approach of the interventions may still be based on the established theories.

'The school I was...we had a guidance counsellor that before you...enter your senior school, you're gonna be asked...what subjects you're good at and what subjects you aren't good at, so instead of going into there just 'cause you want to do, you do what you're good at, where you have high grades...'

If this is the case more widely it will be useful to review the approaches for guidance practice in the country and consider more contemporary approaches. For example, a constructivist approach allows individuals to construct meaning, in this case of career, through their social contexts and experiences (Patton and McMahon, 2006). It may enable them to explore more meaningful, albeit constrained constructs of their past and present experiences, within their own context. Social constructivism places such meaning making into a social context and is the ontological basis of Savickas's Life Design (2012). Understanding of identity, skills and interests is reflected upon in order to understand not only the trajectory of career, but life as a whole. This holistic approach may be more useful in this and other contexts than more established career theories (Reid, 2006). In considering ways in which this could be delivered in practice, career learning and development should integrate activities

of careers education, information, advice and guidance or counselling, as well as lifelong learning (Barnes, Bassot and Chant, 2011). This can be delivered in one-to-one settings as well as in career learning sessions. In one-to-one interventions, a key constructivist approach is the use of narratives through which the practitioner, working alongside the client, facilitates an understanding of how past or current events may affect their lives, and how they might respond to them (Reid, 2006).

However Reid, in 2006, questioned whether this approach may be too abstract in practice for some, and it may be that integration into an established interview structure or model for interviewing would strengthen its more widespread use. Moreover Roberts (2009, p.358) argues that the focus of career development should be seeking the source of change in opportunity structures rather than 'probing young people's minds'. Furthermore time restrictions to build rapport with a client, may impede its practicality in a fast paced, target-driven work environment (Bujold, 2004). Nonetheless literature is keeping pace with the needs of emerging practice. The Handbook of Life Design (Nota and Rossier, 2015) explores the development of this particular approach to narrative counselling across Europe and considers a wide range of contexts, client groups and their needs. Moreover, and importantly for this research, contexts for practice away from the European and western are considered by McMahon and Watson (2016) and Arulmani et al (2014).

In conclusion, the participants in this study had varying experiences in relation to career guidance support being provided in their schools. In the context of the 21st century labour market, the approach and quality of interventions provided to these young people did not do enough to prepare them for the demands of an unpredictable labour market. As stated earlier, although this work explored two particular cases, their responses and thoughts provide insight into the current provision in Nigeria.

In the light of these, this study suggests that secondary schools in Nigeria further develop careers provision for students which should be made available for all age groups. The goal of such provision should move on from helping young people to make decisions for transitions at key stages, toward supporting young people to attain independence for their

career development and life as a whole. This may not of course be a lesson for only the Nigerian context. To this end a constructivist approach seems appropriate as it supports the development of young people's career knowledge, skills for life and work and also lifelong learning through interactions and understanding of their social contexts. The CLD 'Bridge' model described by Barnes et al, (2011) encompasses a range of interventions with a constructivist orientation and pays attention to social and cultural contexts.

Finally, if careers guidance is to have a positive impact for young people in schools, educational institutions must invest in the provision of ICT resources, in order to give both practitioner and young people access to a range of quality information. At a time where Nigeria is facing considerable political and economic challenges, its greatest asset, its young people, should be enabled to make the very most of their own and their country's opportunities. Poor quality or unavailable support for young people is a false economy, in any context.



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