

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INFLUENCES ON CAREER AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

This paper reports on a survey of 2,144 junior and senior secondary school student which examined who it was that they see as having influenced their decisions about an education and career following high school. The results demonstrate that the influence of various sources differs by both the age and sex of the students. On the basis of these findings suggestions are made as to ways in which counsellors might make more effective use of their time and energy.

Résumé

Cette étude représente un sondage de 2144 étudiants d'écoles secondaires pour établir quelles étaient les personnes qui ont influencé leurs décisions relatives à leur éducation et choix de carrière à la suite de leurs études secondaires. Les résultats indiquent que ces influences varient selon l'âge et le sexe de l'étudiant. D'après les résultats, l'auteur propose aux conseillers des suggestions en vue d'un emploi plus efficace de leur temps et de leur énergie.

Increasingly school personnel are confronted with the problem of how to function as professionals in the midst of growing pressure from groups which seek to influence the direction of education. Counsellors in particular hear requests and experience demands from inside of the school (e.g., administrators, teachers, students) and out (e.g., parents, school boards, school consultants).

Developing a relevant professional definition in the face of limited resources and a broad range of possible functions is a difficult and pressing challenge. For example, the British Columbia Counsellors' Association Handbook (1968) lists 21 functions which counsellors are expected to fulfill. Of these, seven relate to student career and educational planning. The current interest placed on these last two both reflects the impetus which vocational guidance has provided historically to the career and secondary school counselling profession (Odell, 1973) and supports predictions of an increased role for it in these areas (Fantici, 1973).

However, the haphazard handling of occupational guidance found by Slocum (1969), combined with high student-to-counsellor ratios, raises the question of how it is possible for counsellors to have a perceptible influence on students' plans. For instance, in a study of 309 non-college bound students (Betz, Engle & Mallenon, 1969) it was found that counsellors were not seen as helpful in making vocational decisions.

The purpose of this study is to report and evaluate information which will help the profession of counselling to examine its functions, increase its effectiveness and pass the test of accountability (Burek & Patterson, 1975) in the area of influencing educational and vocational choices. It does this by examining two general questions:

1. What proportion of secondary school students perceive certain immediately available persons (i.e., parents, siblings, friends, teachers and counsellors) as having influenced their decisions concerning post-high school education and employment?
2. Whom do students perceive as having most influenced their decisions about post-high school education and employment?

In addition to examining these two general questions, attention is given to how the responses vary between males and females and among students of different ages.

PROCEDURE

The data for this study were from a survey of 2,144 students between the ages of 13 and 18 who attended four junior and four senior secondary schools in Surrey, British Columbia. The schools were chosen specifically to reflect the composition of the larger community and included a cross-section of all social classes. To achieve further representativeness, and avoid collaboration among the respondents, all of the questionnaires were given at the same time and without prior warning to students attending required classes.

The test instrument included two types of items. One was designed to find out whether or not students saw certain other persons as having had any influence on their plans following their completion of high school. It involved presenting the respondents with two lists, each including the following potentially influential persons: father, mother, brothers, sisters, boy friends, girl friends, school counsellors and school teachers. On one of these lists, students were asked to check those persons who "at all" affected their ideas for a career. On the other they were asked to indicate those who influenced their plans for post-secondary education.

The other type of item was aimed toward discovering who it was that adolescents saw as having most influenced their occupational and educational decisions. This was done by asking them to name the one person who most affected their thinking in each of these areas.

Even though participation in the study was voluntary the response rate was over 97%.

RESULTS

Career Decisions

One finding of this study was that some categories of people affected the career decisions of many more adolescents than did others (Table 1). Among the combined responses of males and females to the question "Have any of the following persons influenced your plans for a career after high school?" the largest proportion of students checked their mother (69.1%) and father (68.4%). Those persons cited next most often were girl friends (33.2%) and teachers (30.3%), while school counsellors were checked by the smallest number (18.9%).

Table 1

Percent of adolescents who report having been influenced by various sources in their career decision, by sex and age.

Source	Age					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
<i>Males</i>						
Father	71.0	76.3	72.2	64.9	67.0	62.2
Mother	61.7	75.8	68.6	60.7	64.9	54.8
Brothers	22.1	27.9	23.1	23.7	25.4	26.8
Sisters	16.3	19.0	21.4	11.8	18.9	23.2
Boy Friends	15.1	18.4	23.1	22.8	24.3	25.6
Girl friends	17.5	17.9	14.8	17.1	24.9	36.6
Counsellors	11.6	14.8	18.4	17.5	20.6	26.8
Teachers	27.9	30.5	33.2	25.6	32.4	31.7
<i>Females</i>						
Father	61.1	65.0	59.6	58.2	53.7	56.5
Mother	74.1	77.3	71.1	72.3	68.0	63.8
Brothers	18.5	20.7	18.0	18.1	19.7	27.5
Sisters	31.5	30.5	30.3	28.4	26.2	34.8
Boy Friends	10.2	19.7	21.9	25.9	33.2	44.9
Girl friends	39.8	43.8	46.5	43.6	45.1	39.1
Counsellors	14.8	13.3	17.1	20.9	25.0	14.5
Teachers	28.7	27.1	29.4	34.0	32.4	26.1

The responses of males and females to this item, however, differed significantly ($X^2 = 129.2, df = 8, p < .01$). This is due to the fact that many more girls than boys reported having been influenced by their mothers, sisters, friends, teachers and counsellors. More males, on the other hand, mentioned the effect of their fathers and brothers.

The relative influence of each of these persons also varied among students of different ages. For example, with each year in age between 13 and 18 the proportion of males who reported being affected by their parents went down almost steadily. In contrast, the influence of most other sources, counsellors and girl friends in particular, increased. The pattern among females of different ages was similar: the proportion influenced by their parents decreased with age while the number checking brothers and boy friends went up. In addition to being asked whether or not certain persons had any effect on their career plans the participants were also requested to name the one person who they saw as having most influenced

Table 2

Percent of adolescents who report various sources as having been most influential in their career decisions, by age and sex.

Source	Age					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
<i>Males</i>						
Self	13.2	21.1	15.9	20.7	25.9	30.7
Father	36.8	34.9	33.1	31.3	28.2	26.7
Mother	25.0	24.1	18.5	13.4	12.9	13.3
Brother	5.9	4.8	5.1	5.6	2.9	1.3
Sister	2.9	—	.6	.6	1.2	—
Friends	5.9	.6	1.9	3.9	6.5	5.3
Nobody	2.9	3.6	6.4	11.7	5.3	8.0
Employer	—	.6	—	.6	—	1.3
Relatives	1.5	2.4	3.8	3.3	2.9	4.0
Counsellors	—	—	—	.6	1.2	4.0
Teachers	—	1.2	1.9	1.7	2.9	—
Media	—	—	—	.6	—	—
Family	5.9	6.6	5.7	5.0	5.3	2.7
Professionals	—	—	.6	.6	1.8	2.7
God	—	—	—	—	1.8	—
Others	—	—	—	.6	1.2	2.7
<i>Females</i>						
Self	12.9	14.6	23.6	20.1	25.0	24.6
Father	17.2	14.0	18.7	12.9	14.5	8.2
Mother	40.9	36.5	23.1	27.3	15.9	26.2
Brother	1.1	3.4	1.5	1.9	2.7	1.6
Sister	4.3	5.0	2.0	5.3	2.7	1.6
Friends	2.2	4.5	4.9	9.1	8.6	8.2
Nobody	5.4	5.0	9.4	7.9	6.8	14.8
Employer	—	.6	—	—	.9	—
Relatives	3.2	2.8	2.5	3.4	2.7	—
Counsellors	—	—	1.5	—	1.8	1.6
Teachers	3.2	2.8	2.5	1.9	4.5	1.6
Media	1.1	—	.5	.4	.9	—
Family	8.6	9.6	8.9	7.6	11.8	9.8
Professionals	—	1.1	1.0	.8	.4	—
God	—	—	—	—	—	1.6
Others	—	—	—	1.5	.4	—

their thinking about a job (Table 2). Although males most frequently listed their fathers (31.9%), the second greatest number listed either themselves or nobody (28.0%). Mothers were mentioned third most often (17.6%), followed by "family" (5.4%), friends (3.8%) and other relatives (3.0%). Each of the other sources listed, including teachers and counsellors, were cited by less than 2% of the males.

Females, when asked who most influenced their career decisions, also named their parents most often (41.6%) and themselves or nobody (21.8%) second most frequently. These were followed by references to family and relatives (12.0%), friends (6.8%), siblings (5.9%) and teachers (2.8%).

Perceptions of who most influenced their vocational plans also varied among students of different ages. The proportion of each sex who named either themselves or nobody increased significantly with each year in age between 13 and 18 ($r = .84, p < .05$). Likewise, the number of males listing relatives, counsellors or persons in their chosen profession, and of females reporting friends, also went up. On the other hand, the number naming their mothers and fathers decreased with age.

Educational Decisions

When asked to indicate which of the persons listed on the questionnaire had in some way affected their educational plans, more students checked their mothers (70.7%) and fathers (64.1%) than any other source (Table 3). Those checked by the next most respondents were teachers (29.0%), girl friends (28.1%), sisters (22.3%), brothers (21.3%), counsellors (20.5%) and boy friends (19.9%) respectively.

Table 3

Percent of adolescents who report having been influenced by various sources in their educational decisions, by age and sex.

Source	Age					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
<i>Males</i>						
Father	66.3	69.5	72.8	64.5	64.4	63.4
Mother	68.6	76.8	76.9	63.1	66.0	64.7
Brothers	21.0	26.3	24.9	19.0	20.0	28.1
Sisters	18.7	21.4	16.0	16.1	18.4	19.5
Boy Friends	8.1	11.6	14.8	15.2	21.1	22.0
Girl Friends	10.4	13.2	15.9	16.1	23.7	32.9
Counsellors	12.8	16.3	16.0	21.8	19.5	30.5
Teachers	27.9	30.6	30.8	24.7	23.8	30.5
<i>Females</i>						
Father	66.7	61.6	63.2	63.1	55.7	63.8
Mother	73.1	71.9	71.5	74.5	68.0	68.1
Brothers	19.4	20.2	20.2	17.7	20.5	30.4
Sisters	26.9	28.1	26.8	25.5	21.7	31.9
Boy Friends	8.3	17.2	21.9	27.0	30.3	33.3
Girl Friends	30.6	38.4	36.0	37.2	37.3	29.0
Counsellors	14.8	17.7	18.4	23.4	28.7	21.7
Teachers	28.7	25.1	31.6	32.3	31.6	24.6

A slightly higher proportion of males than females reported being influenced by their fathers and brothers. More females than males, however, mentioned the influence of their mothers, sisters, boy friends, counsellors, and teachers. It is interesting that both males and females were more likely to recognize the effect of girl friends than that of boy friends.

The proportion of males who cited the influence of their parents on their educational decisions was highest among 15 year olds and then declined with age, whereas the number mentioning persons from outside of the family, such as friends and counsellors, increased. This declining influence of parents was also found, though to a lesser degree, among females.

As with their career decisions, each of the respondents was asked to name the one person who most influenced his/her thinking about post-secondary education. The responses again demonstrated the effect of the family on these decisions (Table 4). Although males named their fathers most often, and females their mothers,

Table 4

Percent of adolescents who report various sources as having been most influential in their educational decisions, by age and sex.

Source	Age					
	13	14	15	16	17	18
<i>Males</i>						
Self	6.7	15.5	11.5	21.5	23.9	29.3
Father	28.0	28.7	29.0	28.2	27.3	22.7
Mother	34.7	37.4	27.0	22.1	15.9	13.3
Brother	2.7	1.1	4.0	2.8	2.8	4.0
Sister	5.3	1.1	1.4	.6	1.7	—
Friends	1.3	1.1	.7	2.2	5.7	6.7
Nobody	8.0	5.7	8.8	9.4	2.8	9.3
Employer	—	—	—	.6	—	—
Relatives	2.7	.6	3.4	2.2	2.3	—
Counsellors	—	—	—	.6	1.1	—
Teachers	1.3	1.7	2.0	1.7	1.1	2.7
Media	—	—	.7	.6	—	1.3
Family	9.3	6.9	10.8	7.7	11.4	9.3
Professionals	—	—	—	—	2.3	1.3
God	—	—	—	—	—	—
Others	—	—	.7	—	—	—
<i>Females</i>						
Self	4.0	12.0	17.8	19.6	25.4	23.0
Father	20.0	19.1	16.8	15.9	13.8	11.5
Mother	50.0	34.4	23.6	30.3	20.2	21.3
Brother	—	4.4	3.4	2.3	2.2	1.6
Sister	2.0	2.7	1.9	5.7	3.9	1.6
Friends	2.0	4.9	5.3	5.7	6.5	6.6
Nobody	7.0	3.8	9.1	6.4	9.0	14.8
Employer	—	.5	—	—	—	—
Relatives	2.0	2.7	1.9	.7	3.4	—
Counsellors	—	.5	1.0	1.5	1.3	—
Teachers	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.9	2.6	6.6
Media	—	—	.5	—	—	—
Family	12.0	13.6	16.8	9.1	10.8	13.1
Professionals	—	—	1.0	—	.9	—
God	—	—	—	—	—	—
Others	—	—	—	.4	—	—

over 65% of each sex said that they were most impressed by either their parents, siblings or other relatives. Nearly all of those naming sources outside of the family listed themselves, nobody or friends. Employers, teachers, counsellors and others were each cited by less than 2% of the subjects. However, even though parents were mentioned most often by students of all ages, the number citing them went down with age and the proportion naming friends went up.

DISCUSSION

When answering the items on this survey questionnaire participants were asked to provide a construction of reality. Therefore the responses they gave did not necessarily reveal the true influences on their decisions, but rather who it was that they saw as having affected them. It is possible that the answers had been distorted by their need for social approval (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964; Sudman, Greeley & Pinto, 1965), the desirability of certain traits (Edwards, 1953, 1957, 1959; Dohrenwend, 1966), selective perception or faulty memory. Despite these possibilities some of the findings have special significance for educational and vocational counsellors. One of these is the strong influence of parents and family members. Not only were they seen as *an* influence on the decisions of more students than any other source, but they were by far *the* most important influence. Another is the apparently limited influence which students saw counsellors as having on these decisions.

Since many counsellors base their current activities on the assumption that they are perceived as influential, these findings could lead to a re-evaluation of how they spend their time. For instance, they might consider how to take advantage of the sources which students do see as influential. Acting on this option could mean including parents (same-sexed in particular, but both were possible) in career days, career and educational opportunity discussion groups and time-tabling and programme decisions. Likewise, friendship could be considered as an important criterion for the composition of career and educational decision-making groups. However, while this option would enhance the facilitative function of counsellors it would not increase their potential to influence people or act as an agent of change.

Another response would be for counsellors to work toward becoming more active and potent change agents. This process might begin by examining the priority of items within current programmes and examining the role they perform in the area of career and educational decision-making. Such an examination would involve answering the following questions: What is the mandate from the administration to provide

direction and influence these decisions? How much thought, energy and attention does career and educational planning now get in the overall programme? Considering current staff and alignment of responsibilities how many students would it be possible to significantly influence?

Pursuing the role of a more active change agent would also require some self-examination and appraisal. Counsellors might ask themselves: How important is it to be an influence on the career and educational decisions of students in this school? During each academic year how many students will I be able to influence, and will it be possible to know what this influence is? In how many cases will I be able to follow up students in order to see if their plans had crystalized? And last, to ask the question "If I were a student, would I take the efforts of this counsellor seriously, and would I be convinced of his interest and concern about the decisions I am making for my life?"

It is clear that the students questioned in this study did not perceive counsellors to be significant influences on their career and educational decisions. It is suggested, however, that if schools do intend to become influential, and if individual counsellors and counselling departments become committed to this intention, it can be accomplished. The process for doing so involves planning interventions and programmes; doing a follow-up of students' success in realizing their plans; and continually assessing whether or not students perceive the programme as being influential. In this way counsellors will move toward greater potency as change agents in adolescents' decision-making.

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