

## **Influence of Socio-Economic and Prestige Factors on Career Aspirations of Secondary School Students in Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

The study examined the influence of some selected socio-economic and prestige factors on the career aspirations of secondary school students in Ghana. Variations in the influence of the factors on students' career aspirations based on their demographic characteristics were also investigated. Participants consisted of 1075 males and 1265 females (N=2340) randomly selected from 22 senior secondary schools through a multi-staged stratified sampling. A survey instrument with a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.85$  was used. Data were analysed with percentages, mean, standard deviation and Analyses of Variance (One-way). Results revealed that socio-economic and prestige factors have high influence on students' career aspirations. Students' desire to help improve community life was reported as the most significant socio-economic factor that influences their career aspirations. Significant differences in the influence of socio-economic and prestige factors on students' career aspirations were reported in respect of school setting and school-type. Implications of the findings for counselling and human resource development are discussed. This includes the need for career counsellors to recognize the relevant socio-economic and prestige factors that influence students' aspirations in their career guidance sessions to enable them better assist their clients.

The process by which individuals select and eventually settle in specific occupations has been a subject of much interest in Career Guidance and Occupational Psychology. In this connection several theorists (Bandura, 1977, Crites, 1981, Holland, 1985, Gottfredson, 1996) have highlighted the forces that influence individual's career choice.

The sociological perspective of career development stresses the cultural, social, economic and other environmental determinants of career choice and aspirations. The theories that are classified under this category usually known as non-psychological theories of career/vocational choice attribute choice phenomena to the operation of some system which is external to the individual.

One prominent sociological perspective to career choice is the status attainment model (Hotchkiss and Borow, 1990). The status attainment model includes a focus on educational and occupational choices and, in part, investigates the influence of family background and parents, friends, and

relatives and those choices. The model also considers the influence of career expectations on career attainments.

This relatively simple attainment model has stimulated an enormous amount of empirical research (Sewell and Hauser, 1975; Alexander and Eckland, 1975; Hauser, Tsai, and Sewell, 1983). Despite strong empirical support for the status attainment model, it has come under criticism for providing only a partial account of status attainments. Many sociologists argue that the model is incomplete. According to the critics, "the most important omission from the model is an account of how social structures such as rules of access to jobs, salary schedules, job security, and performance standards – interact with individual characteristics to influence socioeconomic outcomes of individuals" (Hotchkiss and Borow, 1990; p270).

Another sociological perspective on career choice and development is the economic theory of schooling and competitive market (Hotchkiss and Borow, 1990). One aspect of the economic theory which is of relevance in this study is the human capital theory. Human capital theory is developed around the analogy that individuals invest in their own productivity in a manner similar to the way investments in physical capital are made. Investments include direct outlays for educational cost and foregone earnings during the period of investment (for example, period of college attendance) (Becker, 1975; Mincer, 1974). Individuals differ in preferences and abilities, and each person makes investment decisions so as to maximize discounted lifetime earnings. This means individuals are interested not only in their future earnings. An increasingly important aspect of the human capital approach is that individuals make career choices regarding amount of schooling, type of schooling, and occupation that are optimum for themselves (Hotchkiss and Borow, 1990; Willis and Rosen, 1979; Heckman and Sedlacek, 1985; Lang and Dickens, 1988); that is, individuals make rational decisions to match their own profiles with features of jobs and occupations.

Status tends to influence the knowledge and understanding which youth have of different occupations (Rice, 1984). Rice further reveals that middle class parents are more able than working class parents to develop broad vocational interests and an awareness of opportunities beyond the local community. The socially disadvantaged adolescent has seen less, read less, heard less about, and has experienced less variety in his environment in general, and simply has fewer opportunities than the socially privileged

person. Another non-psychological theory of career aspirations and development is the social learning theory of career decision-making (Krumboltz, 1979; Mitchell and Jones, 1976). This theory is an outgrowth of the general social learning theory of behaviour, which is most often associated with the work of Bandura (1977). The social learning theory assumes that the individual personalities and behavioural repertoires that persons possess arise primarily from their unique learning experiences, rather than from innate developmental or psychic processes. The social learning theory of career decision making is designed to address the question of why people enter particular educational programmes or occupations, why they may change educational programmes or occupations at selected points in their lives, and why they may express various preferences for different occupational activities at selected points in their lives.

As a result, low socioeconomic status boys are inclined to take the only job they know about at the time they enter the labour market. The same principle applies to girls (Shertzer, 1985).

According to Grigg and Middleton (cited in Rice, 1984), the total socioeconomic and cultural background of youths influences their job knowledge and their job preference. Furthermore, local variations in occupational choice tend to correspond with variations in the economic structure: the larger the proportion of persons employed in a particular kind of job in a city, the larger the proportion of youths who desire to go into that occupation. Also, whether an adolescent lives in a rural or urban environment is a factor in vocational choice. Urban boys have been observed to have higher occupational expectations than rural boys (Sewell and Orenstein, cited in Rice, 1984).

Adolescents also say they want to go into an occupation simply because it sounds glamorous, or it has high prestige value (Rice, 1984). A cursory examination of occupational prestige data reveals that some jobs are more prized than others (Featherman and Hauser, 1976). According to Shertzer (1985), many systems have been proposed for grouping occupations by socioeconomic factors. He observes that standards often used include the intelligence, skill, and education required for each occupation. Most of the systems classify occupations on an inferior-superior basis. The most widely known socioeconomic classification system is that proposed by Edwards and cited by Shertzer (1985). He suggested the

following classifications: Professionals; Proprietors, managers and officials; Clerical and kindred workers; Skilled workers and foremen; Semiskilled workers; and Unskilled workers (Farm workers, labourers, servants).

Classification system based on how people outside the occupation rank it is called prestige or status classification system. These systems are usually closely related to socioeconomic classifications. Some of the elements that seem to determine the prestige of an occupation are the amount of money earned, the amount of education required, the amount of power and influence exercised, the extent of manual labour performed, and the security provided.

Apparently the influence of socio-economic factors on the career decision making of individuals is critical. This has stimulated a number of studies world-wide. Unfortunately, very little seems to have been done in this area by way of research investigations in Ghana. This study was designed to fill this research gap. To this end, the current study examined the extent to which socio-economic and prestige factors impact on the career aspirations of secondary school students in Ghana. Specifically, it examined:

- the prominent socio-economic and prestige factors that influence students' career aspirations; and
- the variations in the influence of the socio-economic and prestige factors on students' career aspirations based on their demographic characteristics.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The study was a national survey and in order to make the sample have a national representation, steps were taken through appropriate sampling procedures to ensure that students from different parts of the country were included. A sample size of 2861 was obtained for the study from 22 public Senior Secondary Schools through a multi-staged stratified random sampling. Out of the initial sample, 2340 produced valid and useable completed instruments. These participants consisted of 1075 (45.9%) males and 1265 (54.1%) females with a residential status composition of 1853 (79.2%) boarding and 487 (20.8%) day students.

The minimum age of respondents was 16 years with 25 years being the maximum. The mean age for the group was 18.2 with a standard

deviation of 1.1. Of the 2340 participants, 1393 (59.6%) were from urban schools, 656 (28.0%) were from schools in small towns and 291 (12.4%) from rural schools. Settlements classified as 'rural' had population less than 5,000; 'small towns' had population between 5000 and 50,000 whilst urban areas had more than 50,000 inhabitants. On the basis of school-type, 1621 (69.2%) of the respondents were from mixed schools whilst 430 (18.4%) and 289 (12.4%) were from 'girls-only' and 'boys-only' schools respectively. The ethnic composition of the respondents were as follows: Ashantis (28.4%), Fantis (20.6%), Balsa/Frafra (22.2%) and others (28.8%).

### **Instrument**

One set of survey instrument was designed by the researcher to collect data from the sampled students. The instrument consisted of four parts. Part one contained twenty items that collected data on the demographic characteristics of respondents. Part two elicited information from students on the profession they would like most to enter after completing their education. They were asked to state and describe in an open-ended form their most preferred occupation. Part three of the instrument consisted of an 11 – item likert – type scale which measured the influence of socio economic and prestige factors on students' career aspirations. Students were made to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed to the suggestions that some particular socio economic and prestige factors influenced their career aspirations. The gradation provided were: no opinion: 0, strongly disagree: 1, disagree: 2; agree: 3; and strongly agree: 4. The scale had a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.85$ .

### **Procedure**

The administration of the questionnaire was done either in the classrooms of the students or the school's assembly hall. The selected students were asked to stay in their classrooms, where appropriate, or were organized in the school's assembly hall and the questionnaire given to them, and the purpose of the study was explained. There was a 93.2 per cent return rate of the questionnaires.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were statistically analysed with the SPSS 10.0 format. Frequency distributions, percentages, means, standard deviation and

Analyses of Variance (one-way) were used to analyze the data. The alpha level of .05 was used in decision making. Post Hoc test using Scheffe and Tukey for multiple comparisons were also applied where appropriate.

A mean score was obtained for each of the statements on a five-point scale. The codes used were strongly agree -4, agree-3, disagree - 2, strongly disagree - 1, no opinion - 0. For reporting scores and carrying out analyses, participants who responded 0 to an item were removed from consideration with the assumption that a "No opinion" response is equivalent to an omit. This effectively made the five-point scale a four-point scale (strongly agree - 4, agree - 3, disagree - 2, strongly disagree -1) and caused some slight fluctuations in the sample sizes across results. Mean scores of 2.6 and above suggested agreement with a given statement and mean scores of 2.4 and below suggested disagreement with the given statements. Mean scores of between 2.41 and 2.59 indicated a neutral or uncertain position. These analyses helped to compare the extent to which the various groups of students accepted or rejected the suggestions about the influence of the various issues in the scales on their career aspirations.

Discussion on the frequency distribution of the responses makes the assumption that a combination of the multiple categories of the five point Likert-scale into three categories: Agree (strongly agree and agree), No opinion, and Disagree (strongly disagree and disagree) presents a clearer picture of the pattern of the responses.

## **Results**

### **Prominent socio-economic and prestige factors that influence students' career aspirations**

Table 1 shows the summary of descriptive statistics on the responses (n=2340) of students to some socio-economic factors that influence their career aspirations. Students generally agreed (strongly agree and agree) that all the socio-economic factors listed in Table 1 had some influence on their occupational choices. The factor that was most popular with students was the one which suggested that they chose their preferred occupations because they "like helping to improve community life" (54.0% strongly agreed, 38.4% agreed; n=2288, mean=3.4878). This was followed by the belief that their chosen occupations will help them live comfortable life (49.1% strongly agreed, 42.5% agreed, n=2305, mean=3.4108) and the perception that people have a lot of respect for their chosen occupations

(49.7% strongly agreed, 37.6% agreed; n=2301, mean=3.3620). The view that the occupations the students were aspiring to enter would help them avoid prolong employment was also highly rated (Table 1). However, the suggestion as to whether students' aspirations towards their chosen occupations were motivated by monetary attraction did not receive that high rating.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Students' responses to some Socio-economic and Prestige Factors that Influence Career Aspirations

Factors	N	Mean	SD
People have a lot of respect for the work	2301	3.3620	.7597
I will become important in society	2235	3.0828	.8738
I like to improve community life	2288	3.4878	.6279
I can make a lot of money	2275	3.1116	.8429
It has good working conditions	2250	3.3400	.7588
Community needs workers in the profession	2220	3.2698	.7873
It has a high prestige value	2254	3.2848	.7422
I have heard a lot about the work	2256	2.8555	.9133
I have read and learnt a lot about job in books	2284	3.2947	.7402
It will enable me live comfortable life	2305	3.4108	.6705
It will help me avoid prolonged unemployment after school	2242	3.2868	.7780

#### **Demographic differences in the influence of socio-economic and prestige factors on students' career aspirations**

The study investigated the distribution of the responses of students (n=2340) by gender on socio – economic factors that influence career aspirations. Significant gender difference in opinion at .05 level of significance was obtained on the item "I can make a lot of money" (Table

1). An examination of the frequency distribution of the responses to the item referred to above reveals that a higher proportion of male students (80% agreed or strongly agreed) presented stronger opinion on the item than the female students did (75% agreed or strongly agreed). The mean scores of responses of the students (male:  $n=1036$  mean=3.1651; female  $n=1239$ , mean=3.0670) confirmed this observation. It would appear that pecuniary motive as a factor of influence in the career choice of students is more important to male students than female students.

Significant gender differences in opinion were also recorded on the items "I will become important in society" and "it has a high prestige value". The male students reported higher mean values than the female student did on both items. This implies that gaining prestige and social recognition are more important to male students than female students. Computation of One-way ANOVA on the combined responses to the items in Table 1 however, revealed that there was generally no significant difference between the male and female students in their opinions on the extent to which socio-economic factors influence their career aspirations,  $f(1, 2336) = .123, p=.726$  (Table 2).

The study further examined the distribution of responses of students ( $n = 2340$ ), by their school settings, on socio – economic factors that influence their career aspirations. Computation of One-way ANOVA from the combined responses to the items in Table 1, revealed that generally the views expressed by students on the extent to which socio-economic factors influenced their career aspirations did vary with school settings,  $f(2, 2335) = 3.290, p=.037$  (Table 2).



**Table 2: One-way ANOVA results on the Perceived Influence of Socio-economic and Prestige Factors on Students' Career Aspirations**

Variable	Source	SS	DF	MS	F	Significance
Gender	Between	4.406	1	4.406	.123	.726
	Within	83483.660	2336	35.738		
Residential Status	Between	62.458	1	62.458	1.746	.186
	Within	83425.608	2336	35.713		
Age	Between	189.760	5	37.952	1.062	.379
	Within	83298.306	2332	35.720		
School Setting	Between	234.617	2	117.308	3.290	.037
	Within	83253.449	2335	35.655		
School type	Between	856.295	2	428.147	12.09	.000
	Within	82631.771	2335	35.388	9	
Usual place of residence	Between	74.504	2	37.252	1.043	.353
	Within	83413.561	2335	35.723		
Ethnic group	Between	262.180	7	37.454	1.049	.395
	Within	83225.885	2330	35.719		

One other area of interest in the study was to examine the distribution of the responses of students ( $n=2340$ ), by their school type, on socio – economic factors that influenced their career aspirations.

One-way ANOVA computed from the pooled responses to the items in Table 1 proved that significant difference existed among students from the different school-types in their views on the extent to which socio-economic factors influence their career aspirations,  $f(2, 2335) = 12.099$ ,  $p=.000$  (Table 1). Follow up tests using Scheffe and Tukey tests for multiple comparisons revealed that the actual difference was located between mixed school students and students from girls' schools with a mean difference of 1.5296 significant at .05 level.

The study also examined the responses of students ( $n= 2340$ ) by their residential status, size of settlement where they usually reside, age and ethnic background on socio-economic factors that influence their career aspirations. These variables, however, did not prove to be significant determinants in the variations in the influence of socio-economic factors on students' career aspirations (Table 2).

### **Discussion**

The study revealed that socio-economic factors strongly influence the career aspirations of adolescent secondary school students in Ghana. Bell and Staw (1989) have pointed out that although people may have some choice about the career they follow, this is influenced significantly by their surrounding social and economic conditions. Individuals may be directed or attracted to a certain career by their individual skills and qualifications, or by environmental factors such as social class milieu, culture and race (Dalton, 1989; Derr, 1986; Nicholson and West, 1989; Thomas and Alderfer, 1989).

Studies conducted elsewhere indicate that socio-economic status tends to influence the knowledge, understanding, vocational interest and aspirations of the youth (Rice, 1984; Shertzer, 1985). The findings from this study indicate that socio-economic factors have great influence on the career aspirations of Ghanaian youth as well. The result of this study is therefore consistent with these earlier studies.

It is significant to note that the prominence received here by students' desire to improve community life is consistent with the acceptance they gave to the item under "work values" which suggested that their chosen jobs would give them the chance to help others (Ocansey, 2005). It would seem then that the desire to assist others and so help improve community life is cherished by most Ghanaian secondary school students.

Further more, the desire to enjoy the prestige one's occupation provides appear to be very important to Ghanaian youth. Rice (1984) has emphasized that many adolescents say they go into occupations simply because of its prestige value. It is interesting to note that the social prestige level rating of occupations by students has some relationship with their choice of occupations as revealed in the study by Ocansey (2005). Occupations such as Medicine, Accounting, Engineering and Journalism, which had high prestige rating, attracted relatively higher proportions of respondents as the targets of their career aspirations than other occupations did.

The instrumental value of an occupation to provide comfortable life for its practitioners was also reported to be a strong motivating factor in the choice of occupations by Ghanaian students. The standard of living in Ghana is generally low and most of the respondents in the study apparently had low socio-economic background. It is not surprising therefore that the

desire to achieve comfortable life through their future careers is very prominent in the mind of many Ghanaian students.

It is, however, interesting to note that pecuniary motive for the choice of occupation was not given as high prominence as was given to other items in the scale. That item placed ninth in order of popularity. This implies that the students recognise or belief that the desire for money should not necessarily always be the first consideration when it comes to career choice. One could live a comfortable life without necessarily having a lot of money.

The desire to avoid prolonged period of employment after school also proved to be a quite strong motivating factor in the choice of the kind of occupations students had targeted to enter. This implies that students' career aspirations were generally towards those career fields they felt quite certain that they could enter without much difficulty. The problem of unemployment among the educated is increasingly becoming a major problem in Ghana (UNDP, 1993). It is gratifying that the youth in school are becoming aware of this problem and are taking the necessary precautions to avoid the pain, frustration and agony the situation brings about.

In examining the differences in the influence of socio-economic and prestige factors on the career aspirations of students with respect to their demographic characteristics, the study revealed that no significant differences existed in the influence on the basis of students gender, age, ethnic background and their usual places of residence. The school-type and school setting of students, however, predicted significant differences. Students from mixed schools reported the strongest impact of socio-economic factors on their career aspirations. This was followed by students from all-boys school and then those from all-girls schools. Some studies (Sax, 1992; Vega, 1990; Swanson and Woike, 1997) have shown that socio-economic factors that influence the career aspirations of females may vary from that of males and that socio-economic factors such as money and prestige appear to be more salient for men than women in their career choice. This is consistent with the findings in this study and it may explain why there was a difference between the extent of influence of socio-economic factors on the aspirations of students from "all-boys" and "all-girls" schools. What is intriguing is why the students in the mixed schools reported the strongest impact of socio economic factors on their aspirations. Perhaps, the mixed school environment provides a semblance of real life

situation where issues like prestige, power over others, and financial strength are of much importance in determining one's position in society. This could account for the profound emphasis students in mixed schools placed on socio-economic factors in making their career choice.

### **Implications for Counselling and Human Resource Development**

The findings of the study has re-echoed the influence of socio-economic and prestige factors in the choice of occupations by the youth, especially those in Ghanaian secondary schools. Career counsellors and other human resource development (HRD) officers may have to consider this in their career guidance sessions with the youth. Counsellors and HRD officers may have to isolate or determine the various socio-economic and prestige factors impinging on the career aspirations of their clients to enable them better assist those clients in their career choices.

The desire to help improve community life came up as the single most important socio-economic motivator for students' career aspirations. Career counsellors and other HRD officers are challenged to help nurture this feeling in students for full implementation in their adult years. Guidance programmes which will evoke and harp on the patriotic feelings of students could be organised regularly for students. Students could be constantly reminded of the benefits individuals and society as a whole will gain when the collective effort of people in a community leads to overall national development.

The prestige value of some occupations was reported to be a strong incentive for students' desire to be in those occupations. Following this, it might be necessary for career counsellors and other HRD officers to assist students who aspire into those perceived prestigious occupations to do some self-analysis to determine whether or not they have the requisite aptitudes and other personality characteristics that will enable them function effectively in those occupations. Appropriate individual inventory service could be offered to such students to enhance their self awareness and to determine their suitability for those occupations. It may also be necessary to determine the relevance of those occupations to national development. Again, students could be assisted to determine whether or not the labour trend in the country favours additional production of labour for those perceived prestigious occupations.

The threat of graduate unemployment is real in Ghana and respondents in this study indicated some awareness of the problem. HRD

officers may have to instil entrepreneurship skill in the youth to equip them for self-employment. This may help ease the apparent anxiety students have with respect to their future employability. Relevant workshops, seminars, and symposia could be organised for students and the youth in general to help achieve this goal.

Variations in school setting and school-type predicted differences in the impact of socio-economic and prestige factors on the career aspirations of students. School counsellors are alerted and encouraged to consider these variables in order to meet the needs of the different categories of students to whom they provide career counselling.

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