Aspirations of Gozitan Female Students Attending Area Secondary Schools in Gozo

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Introduction

Should I continue studying or should I find a job?
This is the most frequent question that students ask themselves when they reach form five of their secondary education. It is very often believed that there is a difference in the attitudes of students attending Area Secondary schools when compared to Junior Lyceum students. It is often assumed that students attending Area Secondary schools tend to seek a job when they complete form five rather than to continue studying. In this paper, it will be shown that this assumption is not correct, at least in so far as female students attending Gozitan Area Secondary schools are concerned.

The Routes to Tertiary Education

As in other countries, in Malta the educational system is based on three different levels – the primary level, the secondary level and the tertiary level. Both the primary and the secondary level are compulsory while tertiary education is optional. Primary schools are found in almost every village.

Secondary education may be considered to be segmented into two, namely (1) the Area Secondary Schools which are free and for which an entrance examination is not required and (2) the other secondary schools, including (a) the Junior Lyceum which is free but students are required to pass a common entrance examination,(b) private secondary schools, for which a fee is requested and (c) the church secondary schools, which are free of charge but where children are required to take an entrance examination. Students are chosen by ballot at primary level.

Many believe that students attending the Area Secondary Schools, the majority of whom having failed the common entrance examination, do not aspire to proceed to sixth form and then to University, but prefer to find a job as soon as they complete form five. This assumption has been tested through a study carried out by the present author (Attard, 2007).

Research Findings

Research work on education in Malta often leads to the conclusion that there is a link between educational achievement and the home background of the students. Cachia (1997) analysed the occupation of the parents of students in lower streams and found that most of the fathers had a low level of education, and attended school until it was compulsory to do so.

Mifsud (1997) states that students in lower streams associate themselves with the culture they feel at home. This makes it difficult for them to adapt to the school culture. Another finding by Debono, Debono and Caruana (2003) is that working-class students tend to attend Area Secondary Schools, while middle-class students generally attend schools which prepare students for University admission and prepare them for their future work.

However these findings can be disputed. Research also shows that working-class students have an equal chance to do well at school as those belonging to the middle class. Grima (1997) claims that streaming for students in lower streams may be an advantage because it creates a competitive environment which motivates them to work harder. Students coming...
from rural areas and working-class students can achieve as much as middle-class students. It all depends on their will to achieve.

Several studies also show that there is a link between the choice of subjects that students take and the job their parents do (Debono et al, 2003). It is often concluded that children of white-collar workers tend to follow University courses more than students whose parents have skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs.

An interesting finding by Gatt and Mula (1997) is that parents tend to give more attention to their sons’ education rather to their daughters’. It was found that parents encouraged their sons to do better at school and they saw their sons as being more intelligent than their daughters, even if both boys and girls got the same grades.

The Maltese educational system is based on streaming. Some studies conclude that streaming may be related more to the students’ social classes rather than to their abilities (Sultana, 1997).

Sultana (1997) concludes that there is a difference between the teachers’ behaviour towards students in different streams and between different schools. In middle class schools, teachers have a different approach with students; there is more creativity and development.

The Careers Report on Gozitan Students (2006) concludes that the most preferred subjects among Gozitan students are languages, although surprisingly there is a higher preference for science subjects when compared to mainland Malta.

This report also shows that gender is a significant factor when it comes to subject choice, especially in Gozo. For example the number of male students who choose computer courses is double that of female students. Female students prefer to choose subjects related to human sciences and managerial courses. According to this report, male students study Accounts, Economics, Technical Drawing and Commerce while their female counterparts choose Home Economics and Business Studies.

The National Statistics Office also states that in tertiary education as in Secondary Schools we find there is a great division between the subject choices of males and females. Males tend to choose subjects that are related to Mathematics, Science and Technology while females choose subjects linked to social science, art and health care (Education Statistics Survey, 2004: 261-263).

Cassar et al (2004) also conclude that there is a distinction, according to gender in the type of school chosen. For example, females who choose to attend MCAST courses choose Business and Commerce, Community Services and Art courses while males choose Mechanical Engineering, Building and Construction, ICT, Maritime and Agribusiness.

Gozitan Secondary School Students

The present author carried out a study with the intention of obtaining information on the aspirations of female students attending an area secondary school in Gozo. Students were asked questions regarding their subject preferences, their performance at school, their teachers, and what they aspire to do when they finish school. Eighteen students aged between fifteen and sixteen were interviewed.

Subject preference

Students were asked which subjects they preferred most. The subjects were divided into four different categories, namely Sciences, Languages, Humanities/Arts and IT/Managerial subjects. The Science category consisted of Geography and Mathematics whilst the second category included German, Maltese and Italian. Home Economics, Social Studies, Religion and History were part of the Humanities and Arts. Accounts, Computer and Business were part of the fourth category. The most preferred category according to these students was Humanities/Arts. This category was chosen either because of the teacher who taught the subject or because it was considered as interesting in itself. The most preferred subjects were chosen by the students either in Form 1 or in Form 3. In both these forms, students have to choose two subjects which they would like to specialize in.

The students were also asked which subjects they least preferred. It was found that the least preferred

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2 Kan. Agius de Soldanis, the girl’s secondary school in Gozo
category was Science. This category consisted of Chemistry, Geography, Mathematics and Physics. The reasons given were either because the students did not understand the subjects well or because they failed their exam.

Career aspirations

According to this research, there was no clear-cut tendency in the responses to the question as to whether the choice of subjects followed in Form 3 was related to a career aspiration. About half of the students interviewed had made a conscious choice in this regard, while the other half were not so sure and their choice of subjects depended on their preferences and what interested them most. In many cases, their choice was influenced by the students’ parents.

Post secondary study

Surprisingly, according to the study carried out by the present author, the majority of the students interviewed wanted to continue with their education after finishing their secondary education. When asked why they wanted to continue studying, most respondents stated that with good qualifications they would stand a better chance of landing a job with a good salary. The general direction of their responses revealed their belief that they would not have a good salary without adequate qualifications.

It is interesting that the motive is not a job with a prestigious position and personal satisfaction, but an attractive salary. Earning a high salary could mean to such students achieving a high status and a position of power. This leads to material success since one had more choice and could afford to buy expensive objects (Abela, 2000).

The role of women

According to the research carried out by the present author, the students interviewed believed that women should be going out to work, but at the same time should be taking care of the house and the children. Basically, what the majority of the students were saying was that housework and taking care of the children are still the main responsibilities of the mother. The majority of the students also believed that a woman should continue to work after she has had children, but there were also good proportion of respondents (about 33 per cent) who stated that mothers who do not have close relatives to leave the children with should stop working during child rearing, and return to work after the children start going to school.

The teachers in different streams

The study sought to obtain information about teachers of different streams. Eight out of eighteen of the students interviewed stated that teachers adopted a different approach when teaching different streams. The general tendency, according to these respondents is that students in lower streams are not given as much homework and attention as students in higher streams.

The majority of the students interviewed (72 per cent) stated that teachers preferred to teach higher-stream classes. One of the reasons why teachers might prefer to teach higher stream pupils may be related to students’ family background. If this is so, it is likely that this could affect the students’ achievement. Some students gave as an example the possibility that those students, who feel that their teachers are not interested in their performance, may lose interest in trying to achieve good grades.

The remaining 28 per cent of the students interviewed were of the opinion that the teachers treat each student fairly, according to how they behave and perform in their exams.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it can be said that the majority of the students were aware that on the whole, those who are in higher streams are in a more advantaged position. However there was still a sizeable minority who did not express such views.

Some students also stated that schools are not always based on meritocracy and that sometimes social class and social connections are more important. Because of this we can say that although the educational system gives the same opportunity to everyone, in reality the level of outcome is not the same for students with different home backgrounds.

It is likely therefore that class and educational
achievement are linked, and therefore working-class students tend to end up in lower streams, and as a result may not get the best form of education and ultimately the best jobs, because of certain preferences.

A conclusion, which to some may be surprising, is that students in Area Secondary Schools in Gozo, who mostly come from working-class families, hold a desire to continue studying rather than to finding a job when they finish form five. The basic motive for this is that a better education means a job with a better salary.

References


Online Sites


Marilyn Attard obtained her BA (Hons) degree in Sociology in 2007 from the University of Malta.