

Factors influencing Students' Subject Choice in Year 8 within the Maltese Education System

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Abstract

In a neoliberal era, where the community is continuously distressed over social and economic issues (Braedley, Luxton 2010), the Maltese education system requires students in the second year of Secondary School to choose 'Option' subjects which automatically channel them into career-oriented mode. The important decision will eventually put them on a "path to a job" (Robert 2015, p. 5). Studies claim that between the ages of 11 and 12 individuals are too young and too inexperienced to make crucial choices (Sultana, Sammut 1997). Adolescence is that period during which an individual's mind "is most susceptible to influence" (Hashim, Embong 2015, p. 1). This paper reflects on the main factors that influence students' approach towards their choice of the 'Option' subjects in Year 8, with particular reference to the subject of Geography. This study employed the mixed method research approach, utilizing a triangulation made up of an extensive survey among students in three different schools; three interviews to Guidance Teachers and three interviews to Geography Teachers. Analysis of the findings showed that the main factors that determine the students' choice include the career-orientation of the students and parental influence. Other factors also emerge, including the students' own learning experience of the subject which is often determined by pedagogic choices of the teacher. This paper will discuss these influential factors, integrating Geography as an example.

Keywords: *Students' Attitudes, Subject Choice, Influential Factors, School Geography, Guidance teachers*

Introduction

The Maltese educational system requires twelve-year-old adolescents to face a subject choice at an age when an individual's mind "is most susceptible to influence" (Hashim, Embong 2015 p. 1). According to Bartram (2010) young people are easily influenced while thinking and reacting to particular situations. Although there are findings which show that children at that age (11-12 years) can also think critically in a way that they are able to assess experiences or ideas and "weigh arguments

before reaching a balanced judgement” (Fisher, Binns 2016, p. 53), other studies claim that at that age individuals are too young and too inexperienced to make crucial choices (Sultana, Sammut 1997). Adolescents would be highly influenced by a number of factors, including what other people say about them and what friends think of them (Bornstein et al. 2010) and therefore they are easily carried away by “social forces” (Stables 1996, p. 225). These include traditional influences such as parents’ positions, family and peer groups’ attitudes (Salisbury, Iddell 2003).

The objective of this research was to identify influential factors that determine the students’ approach and attitude towards the ‘Option’ subject choice when they are in Year 8 of their compulsory schooling. According to research, 50% of students choose to continue with the same subjects they have opted for in Year 8, albeit at a higher level once in sixth form (Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE] 2017). This indicates that the decision related to the choice of the ‘Option’ subjects taken by students in Year 8 may have life-time implications on their academic progression. The aim of the study is to identify how best to support the students to make an informed decision beyond their perceptions and possible misconceptions of the subjects and other factors that may be conditioning their choice.

Literature Review

The psychological and sociological perspective of attitudes is highly complex and very difficult to define (Gardner 1986). Attitudes relate to one’s own mindset (Harrell 2000), what is also known as the “evaluative judgement” towards a person or an object (Maio, Haddock 2009, p. 4). Braedley and Luxton (2010) claim that in this neoliberal era, where the community is continuously distressed over social and economic issues, students are automatically pushed into career-oriented mode. It is assumed that the most important aspect of education is the choice of a subject which will eventually put the students on a “path to a job” (Robert 2015, p. 5). Research indicates that most students base their subject choice on “economic interest” (McNay 2009, p. 56, Adey, Biddulph 2001). We are thus nowadays dealing with persons who are being viewed more as enterprises, who can be economically managed (McNay 2009 cited in Kelly 2016). Neoliberalism in education reflects on the students as customers who are purchasing products that might increase the students’ capital and “thus allow the student to secure a better job, as defined by salary and wealth” (Saunders 2007, p. 5).

Other studies indicate that parents are also highly involved in their children’s subject choices (Gardner 1986) and in most cases, they are considered to be the “primary source of advice” (Salisbury, Riddell 2003, p. 125) for pupils of that age. According to different studies carried out in Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden and the USA, parents tend to communicate their interests to their children and the same children consequently opt for subjects which relate to their parents’ interest, beliefs

and occupations (Davies, Guppy 1997, Dryler 1998, Van de Werfhorst et al. 2003). Although there are studies which state that parental involvement in the academic progress of their children tends to decrease drastically during the secondary school years (Belenardo 2001), other findings indicate that certain parents, especially those having a higher level of education, tend to “dictate” to their children which subjects they should choose, without leaving their children the freedom to make their own decisions (Akintade 2012, p. 2). Students may also be influenced to choose a subject and not another if one or both parents are proficient in a specific subject and therefore would be able to help their children in their studies and homework (Chambers 1999). One important factor which should also be taken into consideration is the perception of parents towards the subject. For example, in the case of Geography, parents would have themselves experienced a totally different didactic methodology than what is used today. Because of this experience, some may conclude that studying Geography consists entirely of learning facts and maps or general knowledge (Holt-Jensen 2009, Gersmehl 2014).

Attitudes, beliefs and feelings towards a subject are closely related to the perception towards the subject, which may also influence an individual during his/her subject choice (Heinzmann 2013). These can either block learning and therefore the student will not choose the given subject or else, these perceptions may influence the individual positively and lead to successful learning of the subject (Korth 2005). In fact, another issue which tends to influence students' choices is the concept of integrative motivation, which explains whether a pupil “identifies” himself/herself with the subject (Cook 2001, p. 115). If the individual rejects or does not identify himself or herself with the subject, then probably the individual would have a rather negative attitude towards the subject (Klein 1986) and it is more likely that the individual would not make that particular choice.

Educators must also develop inspiring and relevant pedagogic choices to promote the subject and to make the subject significant to students' lives, which consequently helps to “increase student's interest” (Jeronen 2017, p. 150). This is corroborated in literature which claims that teaching styles can have an essential influence on the pupils' short-term and long-term educational experiences, as it involves the way teachers transmit the subjects to the students (Smith 2005, Killen 2006). Furthermore, Poskitt and Bonney (2016) found out that students like and tend to choose subjects taught by teachers who make learning fun. The importance of teachers' enthusiasm and professionalism in high quality and engaging pedagogic choices has been sustained for decades by many research projects including: Bandura (1977), Barsade (2002), Carbonneau et al. (2008) and Senior et al. (2018).

There are also other findings which reveal the relationship between subject choice, attitudes and self-concept. Our own attitudes give us the opportunity to communicate our own values and beliefs towards different situations (Pratkanis et al. 2014). In turn, said values and beliefs lead us to formulate thoughts, perceptions, behaviour and choices.

Subject Choice in the Maltese Educational System

The subject choice process in Year 8 has always been an important aspect in Maltese Educational Systems. Nowadays, through the implementation of *My Journey* project, it is being given more importance in a different way. Through the *My Journey* project, students are now being supported to proceed their studies through different paths: the academic path, the vocational path and the applied learning opportunities (MEDE 2016, MEDE 2020). The academic learning programme aims to prepare students to further their studies in post-compulsory institutions. The vocational programmes facilitate learning of technical skills and knowledge and allow students to progress to post-compulsory educational institutions, whereas the applied learning path provides practical hands-on learning whilst allowing them the option to progress to post-compulsory educational institutions. All routes will equip the students with the necessary employability skills (MEDE 2016). The introduction of *My Journey* is considered within the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all students.

Before the introduction of *My Journey*, students in the upper secondary classes followed the core subjects and 2 (two) Optional 'academic' subjects¹ that they would have chosen at the end of Year 8. Through the introduction of the new structure in 2019 apart from studying the core subjects, students progressing to the upper secondary classes have the possibility to choose even from the list of the vocational or the applied subjects as provided in Figure 1. The new structure has broadened students' opportunities. The choice of subjects the students have to consider may lead to routes that they and their families may be less familiar with. This makes the choice towards the end of Year 8 more crucial since the young adolescents are not only choosing subjects but they are also defining more specifically their career paths. Identifying what influences the students' choice would allow the system to equip itself better about how best to support them to take an informed decision.

The 3 (three) learning programmes lead to qualifications at Malta Qualifications Framework [MQF] Level 3 to ensure parity of esteem and equivalence of qualifications. The Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC) Examinations Board runs the MQF Level 3 examinations which are popularly known as SEC and SEAC. The Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) route encompasses all the academic and vocational subjects. The Secondary Education Applied Certificate (SEAC) includes the applied subjects. The applied subjects are taught through a more practical hands-on approach. The third option is the SEAC/SEC route and this allows the student to choose a selection of SEC subjects and SEAC subjects.

¹ Arabic, Art, Accounts or Business Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Computing, Design and Technology, European Studies, French, Geography, German, Graphical Communication, History, Home Economics, Italian, Music, Physical Education, Spanish, Social Studies.

**Figure 1: The three routes of *My Journey* Choice of Subjects
(Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE] 2020)**

<p>Core Subjects English, Foreign Language, Geography, History, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Maltese or Maltese as a Foreign Language, Mathematics, Physical Education, Physics, Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD), Religion or Ethics and Social Studies.</p>
<p>Optional Subjects SEC Route: Arabic, Art, Accounts or Business Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Chinese, Computing, Design and Technology, European Studies, French, Geography, German, Graphical Communication, History, Home Economics, Italian, Music, Physical Education, Spanish, Sports Career Development Programme, Social Studies, VET Agribusiness, VET Engineering Technology, VET Fashion and Textiles, VET Information Technology, VET Hairdressing and Beauty, VET Health and Social Care, VET Hospitality, VET Media Literacy, VET Retail. SEAC Route: Applied Agribusiness, Applied Engineering Technology, Applied Information Technology, Applied Hairdressing and Beauty, Applied Health and Social Care, Applied Hospitality, Applied Media Literacy, Applied Retail, Applied Fashion and Textiles, PTI Achieve.</p>

During Year 8, students are involved in a number of school-based activities aimed at supporting them in their subject choice. In some state schools, students and parents are also given the opportunity to visit the Secondary School of the College and attend transition meetings and talks on different subjects including on 'new' subjects such as the vocational and the applied subjects (MEDE 2019). These meetings usually include a brief presentation on each subject and college counsellors and the guidance teachers are present to assist with any questions. One-to-one meetings between students and career guidance teachers are also held to discuss issues related to subject choice to help students resolve their mixed feelings and concerns (Debono et al. 2007). The aim of these initiatives is to support the students in their choice of the 'Option' subject. Statistics show that about 44% of the students in Maltese secondary schools make use of the service offered by the guidance teachers or counsellors (Debono et al. 2007).

The data generation structure

The research method chosen for this study was the triangulation method based on a mixed methods approach: an extensive survey among students in three different schools; three interviews to Guidance Teachers and three interviews to subject teachers. The methods allowed the application of both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to enable a broad analysis and a representative interpretation of the data generated. The quantitative data generated through the questionnaires was further analysed through the Chi-Squared statistical test, whereas the feedback

from the interviews and responses to the open-ended questions from the surveys supported the thematic analysis. The research is based on the context within State Schools, as this sector accounts for the largest population of children in Malta and it offers the widest range of possible 'Option' subjects and possible combination of 'Option' subjects that students may consider through the *My Journey* programme.

The research took the subject of Geography as a case study since it has been noted that the number of students choosing Geography as an 'Option' subject varies considerably from one school to another and the pattern related to the number of students who choose or who do not opt for the subject in particular schools is consistent over a number of years. Considering the trend, it is hence assumed that it would be easier to identify factors that might be influencing the students' choice of subject. The popular choice of Geography as an 'Option' subject in some schools and/or the scarcity in the choice of the subject in other schools provided varied scenarios ideal to explore the objectives of this study. Moreover, School Geography has always been an 'Option' subject for the senior years in secondary schooling and it sustains a tradition which elicits a perception towards the subject that may influence how it is understood by different generations including the parents of the cohort of adolescents who participated in this study. The choice of the three state schools was also based on purposive sampling; the method which is based on selective and subjective sampling chosen by the researcher to include schools which have students who tend to choose Geography as an 'Option' subject, and schools where students do not tend to do so. This enabled a better insight of different experiences at different schools and allowed for the investigation of the possible factors that influence the students' choice.

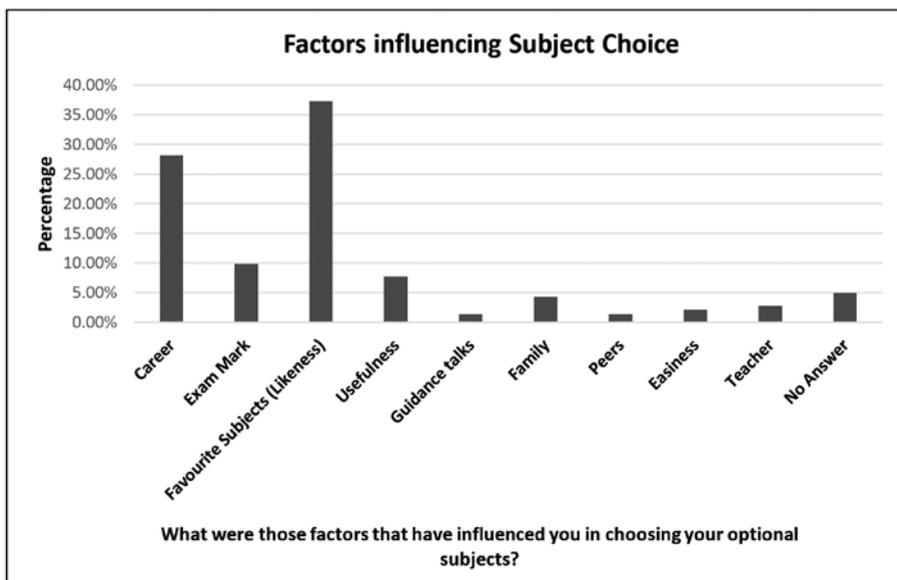
The survey among 103 Year 8 students served as a baseline study. Their response was analysed in the light of the insights provided by 3 (three) Guidance teachers and 3 (three) teachers of Geography.

Ethical clearance to proceed with the questionnaire and the interviews were obtained from the following entities: Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) University of Malta, Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) and University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) University of Malta. Written consent was requested and later granted from all Heads of College Networks and Heads of Schools where the study was to be conducted. All those who were contacted to take part in the research were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason. Since all the students in the research were minors, consent had to be granted by their parents. The students themselves were also notified through an information sheet that their feedback was to be kept confidential. Consent forms and information sheets were provided in both Maltese and English.

Factors influencing the Students' Subject Choice in Year 8

The students taking part in the study mentioned various factors which tend to influence them during the subject choice. Figure 2 includes the feedback provided and the percentage weight for each influential factor listed by the students. The dominant factor in the students' choice of subject is their enjoyment of the subject. This response is backed by the response related to the 'exam mark' and 'teacher' which reflect a positive experience of the students' engagement with the subject. The career path is one of the main factors that influences students' choice. This response is complemented by what the students consider as the usefulness of the subject which implies the importance given to the utilitarian aspect of the educational trajectory. It is evident that the popular belief that students may be greatly influenced in the choice of subject by their peers is challenged by the representative cohort participating in this study. The importance given to the talk offered by the Guidance Unit is likewise questioned.

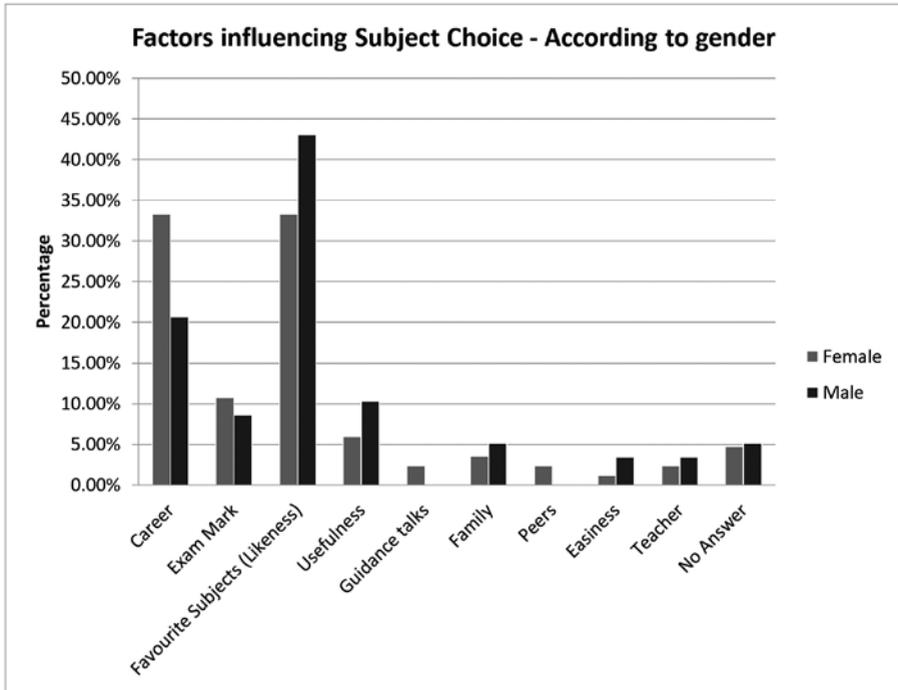
Figure 2: Factors influencing Subject Choice



As evident in Figure 3, it is interesting to note that the trend of the influential factors for the choice of the 'Option' subjects is the same among males and females. Therefore, there is no noticeable gender difference. The most common answer given by both males and females was 'the personal liking of the subject'. However, when one considers the combined percentage weight of the responses for 'Career'

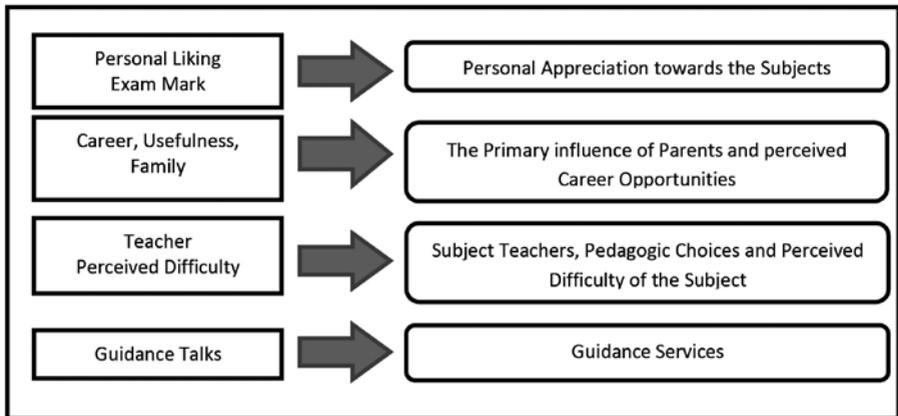
and 'Usefulness', females were more aware of these factors, when compared to their male counterparts. This implies that female students might be more career oriented. On the other hand, the influence of the family seems to play a more important role for boys rather than girls. One questions if this might be related to the traditional role of the family breadwinner associated with boys that the family might be pushing for.

Figure 3: Factors influencing Subject Choice – According to Gender



The factors that determine the students’ choice of ‘Option’ subjects in Year 8, as identified in this study through the quantitative and qualitative responses can be grouped into 4 main themes as summarised in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Grouping of Influential Factors



Discussion

The research discussion focuses on the main aim of this study – the major themes which have been identified as the factors influencing students' attitudes towards the choice of 'Option' subjects. These include: the students' personal appreciation towards the subjects, the influence of perceived career opportunities and related parental involvement and employability, the subject's content, the teachers' pedagogic choices and the consultation with the Guidance Teachers. The discussion will take into account the dynamic context within the educational structures in Malta.

Personal Appreciation towards the Subjects

The Personal Enjoyment of the subject was the most influential factor mentioned (mentioned by 37.32% of the respondents). Most of the respondents who considered Geography as one of their potential option claimed that they really enjoy Geography lessons. The second most common answer was that they achieved a good mark in the subject. This indicates that students prefer to opt for subjects which they are good at. This factor is particularly relevant when considering that the students would not have experienced a number of 'Option' subjects offered for the upper secondary especially the new vocational and applied subjects in the list of choices. This sheds light on the importance of providing students an adequate explanation/exposure of what it entails to study specific subjects. One questions if the 5 to 10 minute presentation of the subject teacher or the guidance teacher to the students and the parents are enough to explain the educational value and associated outcomes that

a specific subject encompasses and to iron out any misconceptions related to the study of a specific subject.

Notwithstanding the general claim by the students that their personal appreciation of the subject is one of the factors that determines their choice of the 'Option' subjects, when exploring their position on specific subjects as Geography, they take into consideration other factors for the final choice. The research findings indicate that the majority of students have a positive attitude towards school Geography, with 80% of the respondents ranking it amongst their favourite subjects. There were many positive remarks of students about Geography including that Geography "is useful for life" and that "one can apply the knowledge to everyday life". However, despite these comments and results, most students who like Geography have also claimed that they have not considered the subject as one of their potential optional subjects (76.83%). This indicates that the positive view towards Geography does not necessarily correlate to the rate of students considering Geography as one of their potential optional subjects. This might reflect external pressures, including parents' advice and the employability factor predominant in a neoliberal economic system. A Year 8 student participating in this study stated: "*Nixtieq insir tabiba u kelli naghzel il-Bijoloġija u l-Kimika għalkemm xtaqt naghzel il-Ġeografija ukoll*"² Another student claimed that Geography is somewhat limited in terms of career opportunities, stating that: "*il-Ġeografija ma tantx twasslek għal xogħol sew ħafna*"³. This can be a factor which underlines the career orientation approach of the students. This finding within the Maltese context is similar to McCrone et al. (2005) findings in England where the key influential factors that affect students during the choice of subjects, include the pupils' perceptions and preconceptions of the subjects, the enjoyment and interest in the subjects, the perceived usefulness of the subject to a future job or career, the perceived ability at a subject and the influences from family and personal contacts. Similarly, in a study focusing on subject choice in middle schools in Australia, Poskitt and Bonney (2016) found out that students were influenced during subject choice mainly by their interest in the subject itself and their perceived ability at that particular subject. Qualifications and employability was also a determining factor in the choice of subjects in this study.

The Primary influence of Parents and perceived Career Opportunities

According to the results of the questionnaire, students might be partially influenced by the attitude of their parents towards a specific subject, in this example: Geography. In fact, 70.73% of the students who claimed that they love/

² Translation: I want to become a doctor and therefore I had to choose Biology and Chemistry, although I would have liked to choose Geography.

³ Translation: Geography does not help you to find a good job.

like Geography, have also claimed that the attitudes of their parents towards the subject is also positive. Although only 4.23% of the respondents claimed that they were influenced by family members in the choice of the Optional subjects, there were some additional interesting remarks about this particular aspect. A comment, which reveals the feeling of some of the respondents, was: "*lx-xogħol li nixtieq u ommi*"⁴. Adolescents are more influenced by the beliefs and attitudes of parents rather than those of their peers (Bell et al. 2014). One of the Guidance Teachers participating in this study stated that they find a lot of parents who believe that one would not have any career openings when studying particular subjects. The same feeling was expressed by another teacher, who explained that parents have nowadays a very negative perception towards certain subjects, commenting that the Science subjects are often considered as a more valid option. Raising the bar in the Science subjects is also one of the targets of the National Education Strategy 2014-2024 and this applies to literacy, numeracy, and technology competence as a means to increase employability as stated in the same document (MEDE 2014). One may infer that this underlying message in the education system itself, apart from other sectors are conditioning the students' choice of 'Option' subjects. It seems that the neoliberalism and employability is a factor which is affecting a lot of educational systems around the world (Poskitt, Bonney 2016).

During the interviews, Geography Teachers and Guidance Teachers mentioned cases where parents discourage or, even worse, do not allow their children to opt for subjects such as for the Geography option, mostly because of lack of awareness of career opportunities in the subject in particular. Another teacher participating in the study stated that parental attitudes towards subjects can easily be transmitted to children and to future generations which leads us to question whether parents base their advice on the perceived career opportunities rather than on a holistic self-fulfilling education (Adey, Biddulph 2001). This leads us directly to the discourse on the neoliberal approach to education. More than one student claimed to have chosen specific subjects because of a particular career orientation. This is particularly of concern when considering the dynamic occupation employment projection for coming decades when these students will be looking for a job.

Subject Teachers, Pedagogic Choices and Perceived Difficulty of the Subject

The students' perception of the subject depends also on their experience of the subject in class. We have come to believe that students' attitudes towards subjects may vary, depending on different factors including their own experience of the subject at school. There is a very important relationship between the pedagogic choices and passion of the teacher and the enthusiasm of the students towards

⁴ Translation: My dream job and my mother.

learning. The teacher's pedagogic choices may determine the student's level of engagement in the subject. The findings show that 3.78% and 8.69% respectively chose the options "I like the teacher of the subject" and "I do not like the teacher of the subject", when asked why they had or had not considered particular subjects as their 'Options'. These remarks were also confirmed by the interviewed Guidance Teachers, who all agreed that the teacher can be highly influential in the subject choice. Some students also mentioned certain teaching styles, as reasons why they enjoy or do not enjoy lessons.

Likewise, but portraying a different context, it is highly evident from the feedback given by some participants in this study that their experience of the subject is very traditional and that these students still perceive Geography as the subject that teaches them "about our surrounding world" and they do not relate it directly to their living experience. One student remarked that: "One has to learn a lot of maps" and another student felt s/he can learn the topics through experience. Other students even argued that they find the topics common sense or pointless for life. This feedback indicates that these students were not engaged with the educational value and outcomes of Geography as understood in this day and age.

Such contrasting approaches to a subject reflect that the experience and the engagement of the students with a subject is directly related to the teacher. This is particularly significant when considering that students consider their engagement with the subject in Year 7 and Year 8 as a motivation to consider or not that subject as an 'Option' subject in the upper secondary and hence, as stated earlier may therefore condition their academic progression and career paths. As also confirmed by one of the teachers participating in this study, teachers should have a meaningful relationship with their subject by investing time and energy to make the subject relevant and interesting.

As can be seen in Table 1, when analysing the perceived difficulty of Geography together with the attraction of Geography as a subject it was noted that most of the students who claimed that they like the subject, have also remarked that they find Geography to be moderately difficult (78.05%). 20.73% of the respondents in this category claimed that they find Geography to be easy and only 1.22% of the respondents in this category claimed that Geography is difficult. 65% and 30% of the respondents who claimed that they do not like Geography noted that they find the subject to be moderately difficult and difficult respectively. This shows that the perceived difficulty of the subject partially depends on how much the students enjoy the lessons and on the pedagogic choices of the teacher.

Table 1: The perceived difficulty of Geography in a crosstab with the interest in the lessons is statistically significant as confirmed through the Chi-Squared Statistical Test where the: $\chi^2(4) = 22.559, p = 0.000$

			Difficulty			Total
			Easy	Moderate	Difficult	
Interest in Geography lessons	I like	Percentage	20.73%	78.05%	1.22%	100%
	I do not like	Percentage	5%	65%	30%	100%
	I do not know	Percentage	0%	100%	0%	100%

As seen in Table 2, amongst those respondents who claimed that they find Geography difficult, none, consequently, considered choosing it as an 'Option'. 44.44% of those respondents who find Geography easy, declared that they had considered choosing Geography as an 'Option' subject.

Table 2: Difficulty of Geography in a crosstab with the consideration of the subject as a potential option, as also confirmed through the Chi-Squared Statistical Test: $\chi^2(2) = 10.649, p = 0.005$

			Geography as a potential optional subject		Total
			Yes	No	
Difficulty of Geography	Easy	Count Percentage	44.44%	55.55%	100%
	Moderate	Count Percentage	14.10%	85.90%	100%
	Difficult	Count Percentage	0%	100%	100%

This shows that the perceived difficulty of the subject can influence the students during subject choice. This was also confirmed by one of the Guidance Teachers participating in this study, who explained that there are students who choose subjects according to their perceived difficulty. A student stated that: "*Missieri jista' jgħinni fis-sugġett*"⁵. This reflects the struggle of subject choice in relation to the students' perceived access to the subject through additional help, including from parents/guardians. The perception of a subject and what it entails studying that subject once again conditions the students' choice.

⁵ Translation: My father can help me out in the subject.

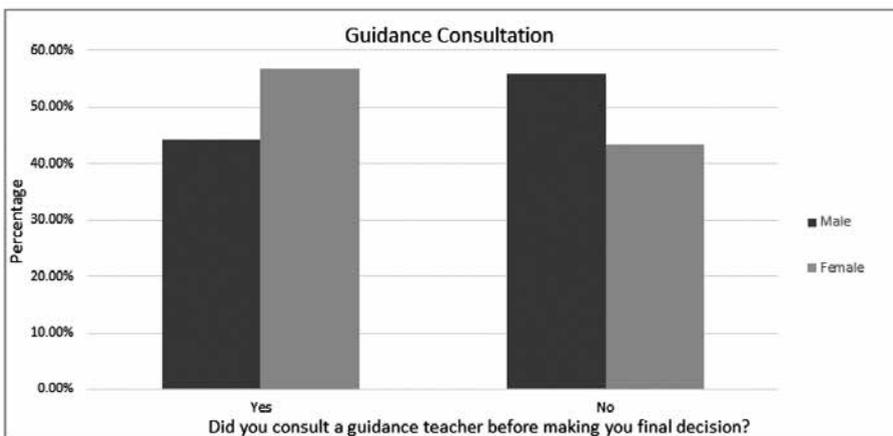
Consultation with Guidance Teacher

Career guidance is given a high degree of importance in Maltese schools. One of the roles of Guidance Teachers is to ensure that all students are given the assistance needed to develop both personally and socially (Debono et al. 2007). As explained above, guidance teachers also offer one-to-one consultation with the students regarding their choice of 'Option' subject.

Despite the fact that very few students mentioned the Guidance Services as one of the influential factors during their subject choice, when respondents were asked if they have consulted the Guidance Teacher before making their final choice, more than half of the students (51.46%) answered in the affirmative. This finding has also confirmed the views of the interviewed Guidance Teachers who explained that a lot of students seek advice from the Guidance Service and that the value of this service is becoming more important, especially during the subject choice period.

In addition, it was found that more females tend to avail themselves of the Guidance Service. As indicated in Figure 5, 44.19% of the male respondents and 56.67% of the female respondents chose to consult a Guidance Teacher before making their final choice. This could reflect the trend that more females than males tend to be career-oriented. This has also been confirmed by one of the Guidance Teachers interviewed, who explained that according to the guidance records in the school, more girls than boys attend the one-to-one meetings with Guidance Teachers. In addition to this, in Figure 3, one can also notice that the only students who mentioned the Guidance Services as an influential factor during subject choice were all females.

Figure 5: Guidance consultation according to gender



One of the Guidance Teachers explained that the system, which aims to help students during the subject choice, is quite extensive. In contrast to this, another Guidance Teacher participating in the study noted that schools are not doing enough to help students in their choice and added that five-minute talks for each subject are surely not enough to help students in their decision. According to most of the interviewees (Guidance Teachers and Geography Teachers), these sessions are not enough to inform the stakeholders about each academic subject, considering that parents will most of the time have to listen to about 24 subject presentations held over two days. Moreover, most subject talks are held in the mornings making it difficult for many parents to attend. While doubting the effectiveness of these sessions, one should not exclude that during these presentations, teachers can be very influential. This has been confirmed by all interviewed teachers, who mentioned that the subject teachers can, during those few minutes, influence students also through their tone of voice and attitude as confirmed by other local and international studies, including Spiteri (2013) and Adeyemi (2009).

One of the Guidance Teachers added that students in Year 8 would not be ready to take a crucial decision such as the subject choice. On the contrary, another Guidance Teacher participating in the study believes that most students in Year 8 would be very optimistic towards a new start and that students would be ready to choose, as they would have already experienced this decision-making process in Year 6, where they had to choose a foreign language to study in secondary school.

The contrasting positions of the teachers reflect the different realities that schools face. Moreover, one cannot ignore that students may reach different levels of maturity by the time they have to take such an important decision and hence would require different styles of guidance. Adjustments in the school guidance services offered regarding the choice of subjects should be considered. This is particularly pertinent when considering that the students' choices are based on their perception of the subject and their experience of the subject which might not necessarily reflect the actual engagement they will be expected to experience in the upper secondary.

Any adjustments in the guidance services should allocate time and ways how to adequately present the subject as offered in secondary schools to address any related misconceptions. Any adjustments in the school guidance offered would involve more actively the parents in the discussions with the students. As seen earlier, the students' choice is not determined only by their own perception of the subject but even by that of their parents. At present parents are invited to school to follow the teachers' presentations but one cannot ignore that within that context parents might not always know how to formulate their questions in order to clarify any queries. This would indirectly present a barrier to the educational progression of the students, particularly those who might need more assistance to understand what studying particular subjects entails. In order to overcome this educational barrier for the students, the guidance and counselling services should consider an outreach initiative with the students and their parents. Parents should be made aware that

the globalised economy is also dictating a shift in job opportunities and hence the choice of subject in Year 8 may not necessarily lead to a specific job as we know it now. Guidance services at schools should also be trained to be completely neutral in their approach with students and therefore should not promote specific subjects or else discourage students from choosing other subjects as reported by subject teachers. One has to keep in mind that the guidance service offered at school is the first point of reference for students and parents particularly at this point in time with the introduction of the vocational and applied subjects.

Recommendations

This study set out to discover factors that influence students during Subject Choice in Year 8. It is surely not an end in itself. Considering the greater range of subjects offered through 'My Journey' and the subtle demands of the neoliberal context that the educational system is operating in, it is fundamental to assist the students further in this important decision. Based on these findings, one may consider the following recommendations to support the students further in their subject choice.

The proposed strategies listed below would allow a better understanding and appreciation of the subject's broad educational outcomes by the main educational stakeholders, including students, parents and educators and hence try to stir away from a utilitarian approach in education.

- Through adapted informative meetings, students need to be made aware of the educational value of different subjects, including Geography, irrespective of specific career paths that would otherwise reinforce the utilitarian dimension of education.
- Collaboration should be encouraged between Education Officers, the School Leadership Team, subject teachers and the guidance teachers to organise outreach strategies among students and their parents that would support them in their subject choice.
- Information on the broad educational value of subjects, including Geography should also be effectively communicated to parents and to the general public through community lectures and mass media campaigns.
- Teachers should embrace their professionalism through effective and high quality pedagogic choices that would engage the students in the learning process of the specific subject.
- Guidance teachers should also be regularly offered information sessions to also assist them in helping students during subject choice. These sessions should also provide information about the different opportunities and career advancements related to different subjects not only subjects that may lead to the established professions and career paths.

A number of suggestions for further enquiry have also been reflected upon:

- Considering that some Church and Independent Schools adopt different subject choice processes and offer fewer 'Option' subjects and possible combination of 'Option' subjects, it would be interesting to investigate if there is any relation between the factors that determine the students' subject choice in the 3 schools sectors: State, Church and Independent Schools.
- It would be interesting to investigate further whether the socio-economic background of the students influence their subject choice in Year 8.
- Since the teachers' pedagogic choices in the middle school influence students' subject choice, it would be relevant to have an in-depth study about the pedagogic choices that engage students with specific subjects.
- As evident in the study, since parents influence greatly the students' subject choice, it would be strategically valid to learn about the parents' perception towards specific subjects. This would enable the guidance unit to establish an informed strategy of how best to address students and their parents.

Conclusion

The underlying aim of the study was to trace the influential factors that determine the students' choice of subject. This research was the fruit of a collaboration between Year 8 students, Guidance Teachers and Geography Teachers. As evident from the above results there are several factors that determine the students' choice, all to a different degree. Some of these factors are external to the educational system whereas others emerge from within the system itself. Students do not get influenced by just one factor but rather by a cumulative element of the different influential factors which were discussed in this paper. As can be seen through the research data, while some students consider their self-fulfilment, and personal appreciation of the subject in this important decision, most of them (predominantly females) get influenced by other factors including economic and the possibility of a career path. As most of the students and interviewees confirmed, these influential factors end up having a major impact because of the pressures experienced by students. The research findings in Maltese State Schools are consistent with other studies as presented in the literature review included in the paper. This study highlights the susceptibility of adolescents to various influential factors as asserted in this research and therefore questions whether the subject choice should be postponed to a later stage, when the students would be able to discern better the influential factors discussed. Such a change in the system should be based on further research.

Young people are asked to choose an 'Option' subject that may possibly determine their academic trajectory and their career path. Their choice is determined by their experience of the subject that is often determined by their level of engagement of the subject depending on the teachers' pedagogic choices irrespective of the

educational value and skills provided by that subject or possibly other subjects that the students may consider. The students' choice is also influenced by their own and their parents' perception of what the school subjects are about and the potential career paths that these subjects lead to, ignoring the possible shifting occupation projections. In view of this context, the support and guidance services provided to students and parents should be maintained, sustained and improved so the students will be led to take an informed decision for their wellbeing and overall development as they strive in a dynamic globalised world subject to the demands of the neoliberal economy.

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