

Learner Suggestions on Improving the Subject 'Life Orientation' with Specific Reference to Career Guidance: A South African Case Study

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Abstract

This paper reports on grade 10 learner suggestions on measures that can be taken to improve the subject Life Orientation with specific reference to career guidance. The sample consisted out of 390 learners from the central Free State region of South Africa, the Mangaung area. The majority of the respondents were Afrikaans-speaking females from middle income households. Data was gathered by means of open-ended questions where respondents had to elaborate using narratives. A qualitative thematic discourse analysis was used in data analysis underpinned by the Systems Theory Framework. Three distinct themes emerged namely Intrapersonal, Societal and Environmental-societal Systems suggestions. Broad sub-themes were identified with reference to the second mentioned namely improved linkage between subject and career choices, enhanced focus on careers in class and extension of information to a greater variety of careers. It is suggested that these suggestions be used as a point of departure to facilitate discussions between communities of practice and communities of learners.

Keywords: Career guidance, Community of learners, Community of practice, Life Orientation, Systems Theory Framework

1. Introduction

Career guidance plays an important role in reducing unemployment, facilitating the match between supply and demand factors in the labour market and addressing social exclusion (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). Social exclusion refers to the process of an individual becoming detached from institutions and communities of which the society is composed of, i.e. the engagement that mediates the social, economic and cultural position of the individual (Randolph, Ruming & Murray, 2010). Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development affirmed the need for countries to establish lifelong career guidance systems as part of lifelong learning and active labour market policies (Watts, 2010). Career guidance can be understood to include services and activities intended to aid individuals of all ages and at any point throughout their lifespan to make educational, training and career decisions and ultimately to manage their chosen careers (Lewin & Colley, 2011). Career guidance and counselling is seen as an effective process to assist learners in participating in the economy and a means of assisting them make appropriate educational choices that will enable them to develop in accordance with their innate potential. Therefore, access to career opportunities that are compatible with individual interest and abilities will be enhanced (Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010). Facilitating the process of appropriate educational or subject choices is the main aim of career guidance at secondary school level (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

Despite the crucial role of career guidance especially at secondary school level, literature on the long-term effectiveness of career guidance programmes is limited (Perdrix, Stauffer, Masdonati, Massoudi & Rossier, 2011). The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, Society for Vocational Psychology and National Career Development Association recommended in 2009 that a social action approach be increasingly implemented in research endeavours that underscore the effectiveness of career guidance programmes. This must be done within a contextual system taking into consideration the viewpoints of different stakeholders inviting space for partnerships to emerge (Perry, Dauwalder & Bonnet, 2009). Boersma, Ten Dam, Volman and Wardekker (2010) distinguished between communities of practice and communities of learners. Career guidance has been extensively researched from the point of view of communities of practice (Gati, Amir & Landman, 2010; Perry, 2009), while the perspectives of communities of learners are mostly dormant (Mittendorf, Den Brok & Beijgaard, 2010).

Against this background the current paper sought to create a platform where one community of learners, could voice their views and provide suggestions on improving the subject Life Orientation with specific reference to the career guidance they are currently receiving in secondary school. In order to implement the suggestions by the governing bodies

mentioned in the previous paragraph the study will firstly be contextualised, where after the theoretical framework will be discussed. This will be followed by the research methodology, results and discussion thereof and finally the conclusion.

2. Contextualisation of Study

In accordance with emerging international trends concerning incorporating career guidance into the core curriculum (Hue, 2008), career guidance within the South African context is a component of the National Curriculum Statement (CAPS) as part of Life Orientation. Life Orientation can be seen as a learning area within the educational context that underscores the holistic development of the learner (Pillay, 2012). Life Orientation subsumes five topics in Grades 7 to 9, including development of self in society, health and social responsibility, constitutional rights and responsibility, physical education and the world of work (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Subject choices for the FET (Further Education and Training) phase are made at the end of Grade 9. Eleven hours per annum are allocated for career guidance in Grade 9, covering seven topics, namely time management, reading and writing for different purposes, options available after completion of Grade 9, knowledge of the world of work, career and subject choices, study and career funding providers, and planning for own lifelong learning. In total, from Grades 7 to 9, 28 hours are set aside for career guidance or 'the world of work', as it is referred to, covering 15 topics (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The overall aim of Life Orientation is to assist and guide learners to achieve their full physical, intellectual, personal, and social potential. The objectives are to develop learners' skills to respond to challenges and to participate in the economy, as well as to teach them to exercise their constitutional rights and responsibilities. To guide them to make informed choices about their health, environment, subject choices, further studies and careers, and to provide opportunities to demonstrate an understanding of and participate in activities that promote their physical development (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

3. Theoretical Framework

A review of the curriculum of Life Orientation with specific reference to career guidance indicated that Holland's Career Choice Theory is used as theoretical framework (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Holland's career choice theory is based on six foundational principles that assume career choice is an expression of personality which can be measured by personality inventories. Career stereotypes play an important role; hence popular perceptions of the different careers validate personality inventories, and act as predictors. Thus it is believed that similar personal development takes place in accordance with related careers (Nel, 2006). It is hypothesised that vocational interests can be categorised into six typologies, namely Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional (Athanasou & Van Esbroeck, 2008). Furthermore, congruence between personality and the work environment is underscored (Nel, 2006). Holland's theory is very popular in South Africa where career guidance hinges on personality inventories. The burning question is: What if there is a mismatch between the individual's personality and job availability, which might result in unemployment? Research also found limitations for practical application with regard to gender and sexual orientation (Gikopoulou, 2008). Additionally, the foundational principles of this theory indicate similar histories of personal development for those with the same career choices and responses to challenges and obstacles are assumed to be similar (Stead & Watson, 2006). Given the South African history, these assumptions cannot be justified. The main criticism against this theory is that it is founded on the principle of the traditional person-environment fit model and does not take the current volatile labour market, which is characterised by downsizing, outsourcing and re-engineering into consideration (Stead & Watson, 2006). The question that arises is: Is Holland's Career Choice theory the most applicable theoretical framework within the South African context taking the labour market and founding principles into consideration.

In light of the aforementioned a Systems Theory Framework (STF) has been proposed. The STF endeavours to embed school based career education within a theoretical framework which takes both the individual and social context into consideration. Thus the STF accounts for situational and contextual influences (Patton & McMahon, 2006). Van der Vuyver and Oswald (2013) indicated that STF provides a theoretical underpinning to investigate influences on career development within 3 systems of influence subsuming intrapersonal/internal system, the societal system and the environmental-societal system taking into consideration reciprocity between systems, the longitudinal effect (change over time) and hap hazardous (chance).

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Participants came from seven secondary schools in the Free State province which covers a large section of the central part of South Africa. The specific area is called the Mangaung area and is the capital of the Free State province. The learner population at the time of data collection consisted out of approximately 640 000 learners (Department of Basic Education, 2012). From the seven secondary schools 430 participants were included in the final sample for the main study. A brief synopsis indicated that the sample consisted out of 155 male and 274 female respondents. The majority of the participants were in the 15 to 17 years of age group, with 24 participants 17 years and older and 17 participants between 12 and 14 years. In accordance with the geographical race distribution within the demarcated area two language groups dominated the sample: 235 participants spoke Afrikaans, while 165 participants spoke an indigenous language as their mother tongue. Only 30 participants spoke English as their first language. With reference to socio-economic status the majority indicated that they belonged to the middle socio-economic strata with 29 participants in the high and 22 in the low socio-economic status categories. Socio-economic status is often taken into consideration when investigating the learner perspective from a systemic point of view. It should however be emphasised that socio-economic status is a subjective self-evaluative concept with the possibility of discrepancy between actual and perceived strata.

4.2 Procedure

A two-tailed data collection procedure was implemented. Firstly, a list of all the secondary schools in the central Free State province of South Africa, specifically the Mangaung area, was obtained. From this list a random sample was drawn by including every fifth school. Not all the secondary schools that were included in the initial sample opted to participate in the research study. Ultimately, seven secondary schools were included in the final sample. Secondly, the consent forms and data-collection instrument were handed out to all grade 10 learners at the aforementioned secondary schools. Indicative of a convenient sample since participants that were present at school on a specific day were included. The final sample consisted out of 430 respondents.

4.3 Data collection instrument

Data were collected using five open-ended questions where learners were required to motivate their answers using narratives. An example for instance is: "How would you describe the career guidance you received from your life orientation teacher?" Due to the large sample only one question will be addressed in this paper namely: "What suggestions can you make to improve the help your Life Orientation teacher gave you concerning job and subject choices?"

4.4 Data analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse examination of the written responses was utilized as data analysis technique. By means of an inductive approach themes were allowed to emerge from the transcripts. Through a recursive process themes were clustered into main and sub-themes with relevant quotations from transcripts italicized to elaborate further (Holtman, Shelmerdine, London & Flisher, 2011). Data analysis were done by two experts in the field of statistical analysis and confirmed by the main researcher on the project in order to achieve reasoned consensus (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

4.5 Ethical consideration

Ascribed to the fact that the sample consisted out of minors gate-keepers' consent was obtained at various levels. At the onset, the study was registered with the Department of Basic Education in the Free State province. After written consent was provided by the governing body the principle of each school was requested to give his or her consent. Thereafter, consent forms were distributed to the participants and had to be signed by their legal guardians. On the consent form it was specified that participation was voluntary and anonymous. All participating parties were informed of the aim, purpose and outcomes of the research project. Participants were also assured that they would suffer no physical or psychological harm as a result of participation.

5. Results

A total of 390 questionnaires with qualitative responses were captured of which 50 respondents did not have any suggestions for improvement, and wrote responses in accordance with this sentiment. A further 47 did not provide any response. Consequently, 293 responses were coded according to the themes that emerged. Data analysis was conducted in accordance with the systems of influence proposed by the Systems Theory Framework discussed in the previous section.

There were three distinct types of response to this question from respondents, the first set of responses indicated actions that could be taken by the teacher referring to the societal system of influence and the school emphasising the environmental-societal system of influence on how to improve assistance from the Life Orientation teacher. The other set of responses indicated actions that the learner thought they themselves could take to improve the help they had received referred to as the intrapersonal or internal system of influence. These three sets of responses will be analysed distinctly from each other in the section below. Of the coded responses N = 66 (23%) were responses underscoring the Intrapersonal System of Influence and N = 227 (77%) were Societal and or Environmental-societal system responses.

5.1 Intrapersonal system of influence

The graph below depicts the suggestions provided by respondents that they could take to improve the help they have received from the Life Orientation teacher.

Fig 1: Intrapersonal suggestions for improving helpfulness of guidance received

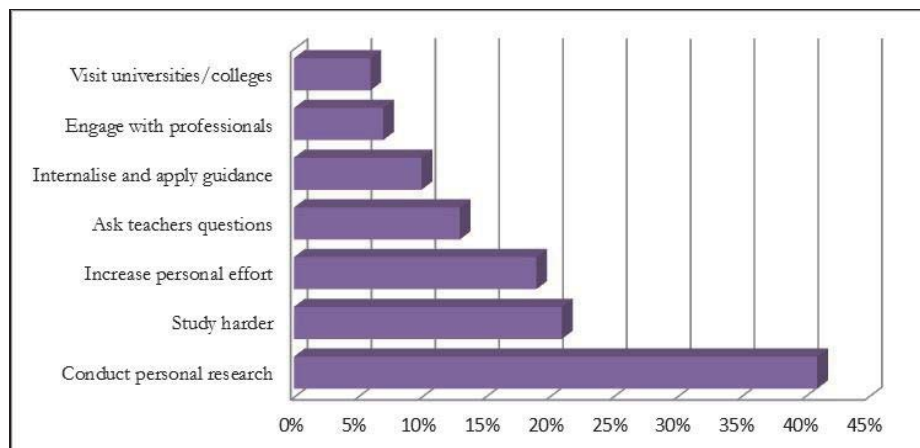
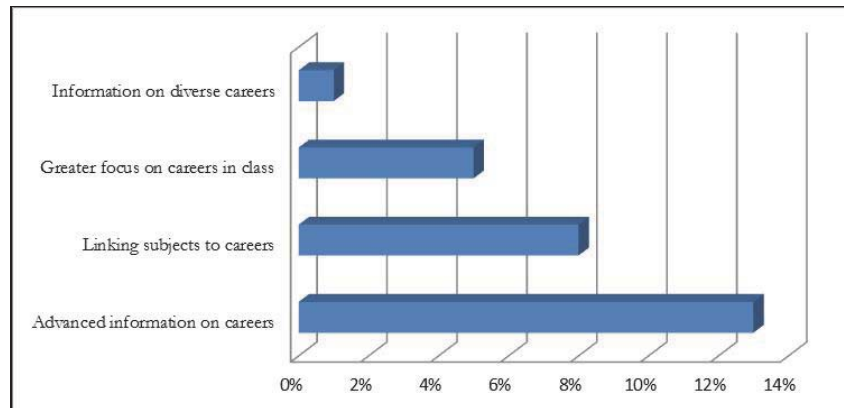


Figure 1 above illustrates the suggestions provided by 5% or more of the respondents. In addition to this list, a fewer number of respondents listed the following: personal reflection (3%); taking additional personal responsibility (3%); acting in a self-directed manner (1%); believing in themselves (1%); having self-discipline (1%) and sharing their knowledge with others (1%).

5.2 Societal system of influence

The societal system of influence suggestions provided by the respondents is reflected in a series of graphs below. The graphs relate to the three broad themes of suggestions that emerged, namely career related suggestions, subject choice related suggestions, and suggestions related to the teacher. Table 1 summarise suggestions related to specific activities. Learners who made suggestions focussing on career aspects suggested that more information should be given about careers, that a clearer link should be established between subject choice and careers, a greater focus (mostly in terms of time spent on career-related curriculum) should be placed on careers in class and that information on a greater diversity of careers should be provided (see Figure 2).

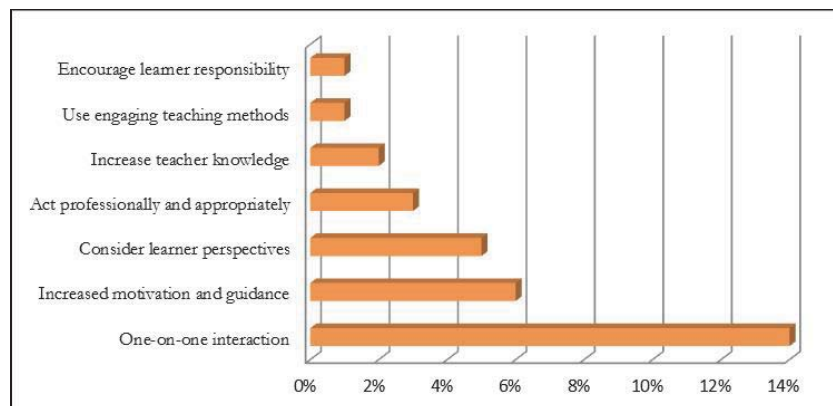
Fig 2: Societal system of influence suggestions: career related



Whilst there may be some overlap between the aforementioned suggestions, the verbatim responses of the respondents reflect the subtle distinctions between them. Per example, the following two quotes from learners reflect the desire for more information related to specific careers: *"To teach us more about the careers we want to do and also give out more information"* and *"To talk more about life related matters related to a certain career and not just give us the basic advice we can find on the internet"*. Juxtaposed with this, other learners suggested clearer links between the subject choices and the job market / career options should be provided: *"By talking to us once a week and motivating us like if you want to be a business man you must take business studies and so on that we can understand better"* and *"They can maybe say what choices you have to take if you want to become for example a medical doctor"*. Respondents who made suggestions for a greater focus on careers in the curriculum, referred to the fact that there was too little time to delve in adequate depth in terms of their own choices and futures. They provided suggestions such as: *"Maybe in the Life Orientation period, we must only talk about subject choices and jobs until all of us find what interest us and what we want to do when we grow up"* and *"Our teacher can put aside like a month of work to discuss this type of work and can do the other work later in the year"*. A limited number of respondents suggested that teachers focus on a greater diversity of careers, not only the traditional options that most learners know of: *"Gather more information like from the South African Police Service, Navy, Air force and make available application forms."* and *"They must tell us more about other jobs."*

Apart from the request for one-on-one interactions with the teacher (see discussion and graph below), suggestions relating to careers were most frequently mentioned by respondents.

Fig 3: Societal system of influence suggestions: teacher focused



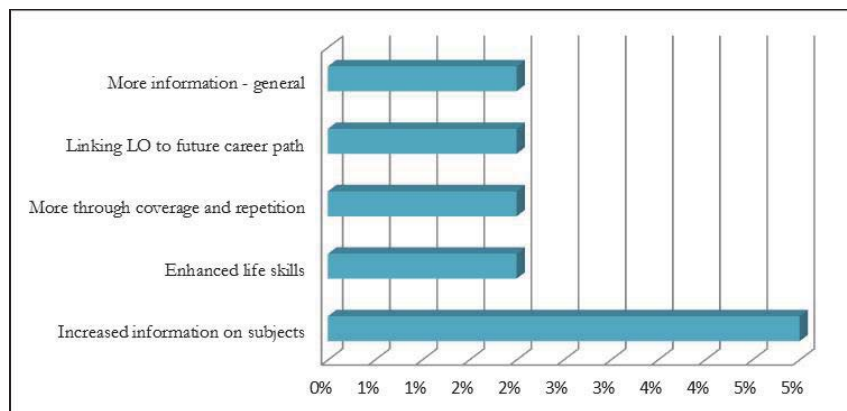
As is indicated in Figure 3 above, suggestions on actions the teacher can take to improve the helpfulness of the guidance are dominated by the suggestion of an increase in one-on-one interactions. This suggestion was the most frequently mentioned of all the suggestions, and is reflected in responses such as: *"She must always ask us questions each and every one of us and not just one or two because in that way we can know what we really want in life."* and *"Talking*

individually to everyone, acquiring information to meet everyone's needs so that we all can be sure of our paths, and how to go about pursuing them". Somewhat related to the theme of one-on-one interactions, 5% of the respondents also mentioned the need "to be heard" by their teachers at a more individual level, for example "Become more open with us, try and understand things from our point of views or from our perspective." and " She must listen to our opinion and consider them to assist us ". Both of the themes above in collaboration suggest that the "one size fits all" approach may provide a basis for guidance related to subject choice and career guidance, but is insufficient on its own. Strongly aligned with the theme of motivation in previous questions, 5% of the respondents indicated in their responses that they would like their teacher to provide more motivation and support in the process. Responses typical of this category of suggestions include: "The teacher must keep on motivating us and must focus more on the future (careers) and keep on guiding the learners" and "She must try to motivate us more concerning jobs we would like to have one day. If we fail it's not the end of the world."

A smaller number of respondents suggested that their teacher should behave more professionally and improve their own knowledge related to careers and subject choices. Responses such as "Give her more information so that she can come and feed us with more of her knowledge " and " To get somebody with better knowledge of Life Orientation for one " reflect the suggestion for increased teacher's knowledge. Whilst, "She must talk to with us with greater patients;" "She must not take out her moods on us"; "She must take things easy"; She must not frequently shout at us unnecessarily" and "She must be very calm with us when she has stressful family problems because it is not our problem she must leave it at home and stop shouting when it is not necessary" are typical of the responses coded under professional behaviour. Respondents also suggested that teachers encourage learner responsibility: "Put emphasis on students to do more research on their career choices; Make them realize that whatever choice they make today is going to affect their whole life." Teachers must increase advising ("For them to always guide us and always give us advice so that we know what we should do and what we shouldn't do in the coming years") and present Life Orientation in "...an interesting and fun way".

The graph below reflects respondents suggestions related to the content of the subject Life Orientation and the guidance offered as part of the curriculum. In comparison to the suggestions related to careers and teachers, these suggestions represent a smaller proportion of the responses.

Fig 4: Societal level of influence suggestions: subject focused suggestions



As can be seen from Figure 4 respondents' responses reflected their need for more information on the specific subjects they were choosing and on making the right choices. Responses coded under this category included: "They must first tell us what the subject is all about and explain the expected things that you have to do", "We must have some periods in which we are told exactly what is done in every subject" and "That they give more information on subjects and help the learners with choices for future careers". Although some respondents suggested that less focus should be placed on other life skills topics (e.g. "She must focus on our marks rather on our love life even though it's still life orientation"), other suggested that a greater emphasis should be placed on teaching learners to make good choices in other domains of their lives, for example "By telling us about sex and drinking in school and teenage pregnancy about how it can ruin your life " and " Talk to us about sexual things, motivate us to abstain from taking drugs and drinking, tell us about good things in life that we must follow ".

Responses typical of more thorough coverage and repetition subsumed: "By going through the work with us more

often because in Life Orientation there are some things that we do not understand so we need the teachers understanding" and "She can spent time to discuss the content and elaborate further in order for us to understand the material". It is however not clear from the responses if respondents would like a more thorough coverage of the content related to careers and subject choices (as is the case in the latter quote), or the Life Orientation curriculum in general.

The table below summarises the suggestions from respondents related to specific activities that could be incorporated into the Life Orientation curriculum in order to improve the helpfulness of the guidance they received. A short description of the criteria applied for coding and an example of typical responses from respondents that were coded under each are provided.

Table 1: Societal system of influence activities suggested by learners

| Code for activity/role | Description | Examples ¹ |
|---|---|--|
| Guest speakers | This category included suggestions from learners to bring guest speakers to the class, including from organisations, higher education institutions and persons in selected professions. | "My teacher could ask a lecturer or a speaker to tell us more about our job & subject choices" |
| More practical work | This category included suggestions from learners related to practical tasks and assignments, including practical's inside and outside the classroom. This included general suggestions, as well as specific suggestions such as presentations, group discussions and feedback sessions. | "Make the life orientation classes a bit more practical and interesting, therefore children can participate more in the classes and see the importance of important subject choices" |
| Job shadowing and site visits | This category included all suggestions from learners that referred directly and indirectly to job shadowing. The category also includes visits to the sites of different jobs for the purposes of exposure | "She can take us every week to different kinds of jobs like the hospital, police station, call centres, businesses so that we can see and experience how it feels like being in that sections" "They can expose us and inform us what each job entails. Additionally, work shadowing should be incorporated". |
| More self-knowledge activities | This category included suggestions related to additional aptitude testing and/or other types of questionnaires and activities designed at increasing self-knowledge. | "To hand out more questions you can fill in to make sure n what things you are good at that you can be sure that you have made the right choices" "Have more tests that can tell you in what job you will be good at" |
| Skills development | This category of suggestions included learner requests for additional skills development, for example better study skills, CV writing skill and interviewing skills. | "Teach us how to compile CVs" "Teach us about how to conduct interviews" |
| Interactive and visual learning materials | This category of suggestions refers to visual and interactive learning materials for use in the classroom to supplement the guidance provided. | "Have experiments and practical sessions to show the learners how realistic career paths are. Make it interesting by showing movies about life, subject choices and career paths" |
| Workshops and courses | This category of suggestions includes all references by the learners to workshops and courses. | "By increasing their effort, create workshop and to demonstrate correctly in class" "Take us to workshops; Give us a little more info than the info they already have; Take us to courses" |

5.3 Environmental-societal system of influence

The Environmental-societal system of influence refers to activities learners suggested the school could take to improve the guidance provided by the Life Orientation teachers. Suggestions by learners included provision of pamphlets. This category resonates strongly with suggestions for more information, but responses were coded in both when respondents specifically mentioned that information in the form of pamphlets was desired. Responses typical to this suggestion subsume: "Give pamphlets not only to grade 12 learners, but also to learners who are in the lower grades to guide us before choosing our subjects" and "They should guide us and give us pamphlets or things that'll show us which careers to take and what subjects could help us." Respondents also indicated that the school could host career fairs and or career days. Typical responses incorporated: "We could have a career day with school learners so that they would be able to decide what subjects to take and whether they are sure about making the correct decision" and "Only one thing that

¹ All quotes by the learners are captured as written on the survey by the learner. No corrections have been made to spelling grammar and/or punctuation.

needs improvement is that the school should have more career days either at school or libraries” In addition, respondents indicated that the environmental-societal system could provide them with internet access. This category of suggestions relates to providing internet access at school for learners to use for research purposes expressed as follows: *“Well I think they should make us learners have internet access frequently so that we can try and find more information concerning the career we looking for”* and *“They can give us access to internet to Google at the school.”*

It was also suggested that the teacher and by extension the school arrange for extramural visits to institutions of higher learning. This category of suggestions included visits to universities, colleges and other learning institutions. It included both general visits, as well as visits to open days. Typical responses in this category included: *“Learners from Grade 10-12 should be able to go to open days at university’s more often, so they can plan ahead and make the right choices”* as well as *“They can offer us a day at a college and we can see if we want to study that subject or do we want to do that job is it the right choice for a better tomorrow.”*

6. Discussion of Results

Three distinct themes emerged from the community of learners in accordance with the Systems Theory Framework, namely Intrapersonal, Societal and Environmental-societal Systems of Influence. The Intrapersonal System of Influence suggestions indicated actions learners thought they could take to improve the assistance they have received. The Societal System of Influence suggestions referred to actions participants thought teachers could take to improve on service delivery. The Environmental-societal System of Influence refers to suggested activities the school could take to increase effectiveness of services rendered. The four broad sub-themes that could be identified with specific reference to the Societal System of Influence subsumed more information on careers, improved direct linkage between subject and career choices, enhanced focus on careers in the classroom and to extend information to a greater variety of careers. Further suggestions included what actions teachers could take to improve service-delivery, and what activities could be included (for example guest speakers, skills development and job shadowing to name but a few). In addition, activities respondents suggested the school could embark on to further increase the services rendered by teachers included provision of pamphlets, hosting of career fairs or career days, access to internet at school and arranging extramural visits to higher education institutions.

Results from the current study confirm previous research with specific reference to the activities suggested including guest speakers and study visits (Van de Venter, 2006). As far as Societal System Influences are concerned the Grade 9 learners included in the aforementioned research also indicated room for improvement especially with reference to more information required and learners not understanding the content of the curriculum. In addition, a study by Theron and Dalzell (2006) on the specific Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners underscored the importance of career choices and study methods as well as lack of information to make decisions corroborating the results of the current study. This notion of lack of information was also echoed in a study by Van der Vuyver and Oswald (2013) exploring systematic influences on initial career decision making.

7. Limitations of the Study

The research study was conducted in a specific region and can only be generalised to said region. Additionally, for the majority of the sample English were not their first language while the questionnaire was administered in English. Despite this valuable information was gained by providing the main stakeholders, secondary school-aged learners the opportunity to provide their insight into the career guidance they are receiving in school. It is recommended that future research be carried out nationally to gain insight from a larger sample of learners. The suggestions provided could also be used to develop a quantitative measuring instrument to increase the rigor of a national study. It is also suggested that the questionnaire be translated in different languages to enable respondents to narrate their stories in their mother tongue.

8. Conclusion

The research reported on in this article is part of a larger study focused on determining Grade 10 learners’ perspective on the career guidance they receive in school as part of the subject Life Orientation. The rationale for such an investigation can be found in the increasing importance of career guidance as a way of reducing unemployment, facilitating the match between supply and demand factors in the labour market and addressing social exclusion. The legal implications of ineffective career guidance practices that violate the basic rights of learners should also be an impetus for investigating career guidance practices in South Africa. Additionally, internationally there has been increased attention given to the

efficacy of career guidance programmes. A specific recommendation by international governing bodies subsumes implementing a social action approach to gain insight from various stakeholders. As such this paper sought to give a community of learners a platform to provide their insights into what measures could be taken to improve the career guidance they are currently receiving in school.

The influence of subject and career choices during the secondary school phase has far-reaching consequences in the lives of the South African youth and on the economic sustainability of the country. Focusing attention on the school-aged population (also referred to as human capital flow) could foster the knowledge-based skilled workers required to permit a smoother transition to the knowledge-based economy South Africa envisions. The subject and career choices these learners make today will lay the foundation of our collective future.

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