

Parental Expectations, Learner Autonomy, and Career Pathways: A Qualitative Study in Zambian Secondary Schools

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Abstract: This paper draws from a doctoral study that explored parents' experiences in influencing their children's career pathway choices in secondary schools in Zambia. Parental expectations and advice play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' career pathways, yet these influences may conflict with learners' personal interests. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of parents, learners, and guidance teachers across three Zambian secondary schools. Data from semi-structured interviews revealed three major themes: (1) direct influence through parental expectations and advice; (2) learner restriction, where adolescents felt their choices were limited; and (3) counselors' mediation, where guidance teachers negotiated between familial authority and learner autonomy. Parents frequently promoted professions perceived as stable or prestigious, while learners described internal tension and suppressed aspirations. Guidance teachers highlighted how deeply embedded cultural norms of respect and obedience reinforced parental authority. The study recommends culturally responsive counseling strategies that engage parents while promoting learner agency and self-determination in career decision-making.

Keywords: Parental Influence; Career Counselling; Learner Agency; Cultural Norms; Zambia

1. INTRODUCTION

Career development is inherently situated within familial, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts (Hartung, 2019; Whiston & Keller, 2021). Among these, parental influence often exerts a decisive role through advice, expectations, role modeling, and financial support (Fisher, 1999). While parental involvement can offer guidance and motivation, excessive control may limit learners' autonomy and suppress intrinsic aspirations (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2021).

In Zambia, career decisions are frequently embedded in collective family values that emphasize filial respect and obedience. Research by Mathatha and Ndhlovu (2017, 2020) examined parental involvement in the career development of youths with intellectual disabilities, revealing how socioeconomic factors and parental expectations shape educational and vocational opportunities. Similarly, Sinkombo (2016) demonstrated that parents significantly influence university students' program choices at the University of Zambia, with family prestige, economic stability, and intergenerational aspirations shaping perceived "respectable" careers. Recent scholarship by Ndhlovu and Zimba (2024) further shows that untrained school counselors in Zambia face ethical and cultural dilemmas when practicing counseling sub-skills with learners, often constrained by traditional hierarchies and community expectations. This finding mirrors the complexities of parental influence and highlights the broader need for culturally competent career counseling frameworks. Despite such evidence, limited research explores these dynamics at the secondary school level, where learners first make career-defining subject and pathway decisions. This study therefore sought to examine how parents, learners, and guidance teachers experience and interpret parental influence on learners' career pathways in Zambian secondary schools.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides a description of the methods used to conduct this study.

2.1. Research Design

A qualitative interpretative phenomenological design was employed to capture participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study drew on Van Manen's (1990) four life-worlds (lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived relations) to deepen interpretation.

2.2. Setting and Sample Size

Three secondary schools were purposively selected to reflect urban, peri-urban, and semi-rural diversity. The sample comprised twenty-seven (27) participants. These are nine (9) parents, fifteen (15) learners and three (3) Guidance and counselling teachers.

2.3. Sampling Procedure

Typical case sampling was used to select parents and learners, while expert sampling was applied to select Guidance and counseling teachers.

2.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions focusing on parental expectations, communication patterns, and perceived learner autonomy. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis unfolded as follows:

Familiarization with the Data: The researcher began by immersing in the raw data through repeated reading of interview transcripts from parents, learners, and Guidance and Counseling teachers. Notes and reflections were made to capture preliminary impressions of patterns related to parental influence, learner reactions, and counselling mediation. This stage ensured deep familiarity with the participants' meanings and contexts.

Generating Initial Codes: After transcription, significant statements and phrases were identified and coded manually to capture the essence of participants' expressions. Codes such as "*parental expectations*," "*obedience to parents*," "*career pressure*," "*teacher mediation*," and "*learner frustration*" were developed. These codes represented the most salient features across the dataset relevant to the study focus. **Searching for Themes:** The initial codes were then structured into potential themes by grouping related codes together. For instance, codes reflecting parental control and advice coalesced into a broader theme of "Direct Influence through Expectations and Advice." Similarly, codes expressing learners' emotional struggles and desire for autonomy converged under "Learners Feeling Restricted." Codes representing teacher efforts to balance parental authority and learner independence formed the basis for "Guidance and Counseling Teachers' Mediation and Cultural Constraints." **Reviewing Themes:** At this stage, the identified themes were refined and validated against the coded data and the full dataset. The researcher checked whether each theme accurately captured the participants' perspectives and whether there was coherence within and distinction between themes. Some overlapping codes were reorganized or merged to strengthen thematic clarity.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was then clearly defined and named to reflect its core meaning and scope. For example:

- **Theme 1: Direct Influence through Expectations and Advice** captured how parents shaped learners' career paths based on family or cultural values.
- **Theme 2: Learners Feeling Restricted** represented the emotional tension learners experienced when their personal interests conflicted with parental expectations.
- **Theme 3: Guidance and Counseling Teachers' Mediation and Cultural Constraints** highlighted the teachers' intermediary role and the limits imposed by cultural norms.

Producing the Report: Finally, the themes were woven into a coherent narrative illustrating how parental influence and guidance interactions shaped learners' career decision-making. Verbatim quotes were used to support each theme, ensuring authenticity and grounding interpretations in participants' lived experiences.

3.1. Data Trustworthiness

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were established through triangulation, member checking, and audit trails, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

3.2. Findings

To answer the question “what were the parents’ experiences in influencing their children’s career pathway choices in secondary schools in Zambia?” three thematic areas emerged:

Theme 1: Direct Influence through Expectations and Advice

Parents frequently directed children’s career choices using explicit expectations grounded in cultural prestige, family tradition, or job security.

To this effect, one of the parents said, “I want my son to be a doctor. It is a respectable job and there is always work.” (Parent, School A).

Another parent said that “we told our daughter to go for nursing. She resisted at first but later accepted.” (Parent, School B).

Theme 2: Learners Feeling Restricted

Learners described emotional tension between filial obedience and personal passion.

This finding is evidenced by the voice of one of the learners who said, “my parents chose Science for me, but I’m more interested in art and music.” (Learner, School A).

Another learner had this to say, “sometimes I pretend to agree with my parents on choice of my career pathway, but I still think about following my dream.” (Learner, School C)

Theme 3: Guidance and Counseling Teachers’ Mediation and Cultural Constraints

Guidance and Counseling Teachers viewed themselves as cultural mediators balancing parental authority and learner autonomy.

This is evidenced by the voice of one of the Guidance and Counselling teachers who said, “some learners are visibly unhappy with their parents’ choices, but they feel powerless.” (Guidance and Counselling Teacher, School B).

Similarly, another Guidance and Counselling Teacher said, “we try to mediate between learners and parents when their interest conflict.” (Guidance and Counselling Teacher, School A).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings corroborate prior research showing that parental expectations are a powerful determinant of adolescents’ career pathways (Fisher, 1999; Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2021; Whiston & Keller, 2021). Within Zambia’s collectivist context, parental influence operates as both a support and a constraint, consistent with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

The mediatory role of counselors observed in this study aligns with Ndhlovu and Zimba (2024), who found that untrained school counselors in Zambia grapple with balancing empathy, confidentiality, and obedience to cultural hierarchies when addressing pupil-career concerns. This parallel reinforces the argument that professional capacity building and contextualized guidance frameworks are critical for managing parental influence.

Applying Van Manen’s (1990) four life-worlds enriches understanding of these tensions—learners’ emotional strain (*lived body*), conflicting spaces of home and school (*lived space*), temporal evolution of career identity (*lived time*), and relational power between learners, parents, and Guidance and Counselling teachers (*lived relation*). Collectively, these insights reveal that while parental involvement reflects care, it can inadvertently constrain learner self-determination.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING PRACTICE

Therefore, four implications for counselling practice emerged out of this study:

1. **Inclusive Dialogue (Lived Relation):** Counseling sessions should involve both parents and learners to build shared understanding.

2. **Parent Psychoeducation (Lived Time & Space):** Educate parents about evolving labor markets and diverse career trajectories.
3. **Cultural Competence (Lived Body & Relation):** Counselors must balance respect for cultural norms with promotion of learner agency (Hartung, 2019).
4. **School-Based Interventions:** Parent workshops and peer mentoring can challenge myths about “prestigious” careers (Mathatha & Ndhlovu, 2017).

6. CONCLUSION

In Zambian secondary schools, parental influence represents a double-edged phenomenon: it provides emotional support yet constrains learner autonomy. This dynamic underscores the vital role of guidance counsellors in developing culturally responsive and dialogic counselling models that both respect tradition and foster learner’s capacity to act independently, make informed choices, and take responsibility for their own learning and decisions.

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