

**Exploring the perceived role of Life Orientation teachers with reference to career guidance provided to Grade 10 learners in the Free State, South Africa**

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**Abstract**

The focus of this paper is on the perceptions of Grade 10 learners regarding the role Life Orientation teachers played in subject selection. Seven randomly selected secondary-schools from the Free State province were included in the project. The sample consisted out of 430 learners of which the majority was Afrikaans speaking females of middle socio-economic status. Responses were given in the form of narratives based on open-ended questions. Examination of the discourse was informed by qualitative thematic analysis. Based on the analysis, the main categories identified with relation to teachers' input relate to activities or role of the LO teacher and the consequence as result of the intervention. Learners perceived the primary roles of the teacher as a provider of information and as offering guidance and advice. The results of this study can be used to facilitate discussion between stakeholders and assist with the professional development of Life Orientation teachers.

**Keywords:** Career Guidance, Life Orientation, Learner Perceptions, Qualitative Analysis.

**INTRODUCTION**

Career guidance is one of the core focuses of life orientation curricula implemented as a means to reconcile the growing discrepancy between graduate-output and the needs of the dynamic socio-economic environment (Maree & Beck, 2004). The South African context is challenged by the restoration of previous inequalities and skill shortages created through past injustices. Against this background, it is not sufficient to merely aid learners in searching for paid employment, but emphasis is placed on creating pro-active and independent individuals who effectively transition from the educational environment into the vocational context (Coetzee & Esterhuizen, 2010). In addition, the onset of the knowledge-based economy and globalization has brought on a myriad of divergent skill-orientated jobs integrating various stakeholders, and increasing the need for knowledge about international market trends (Van de Venter, 2006).

Career guidance as part of the subject Life Orientation is the process whereby learners are equipped with the core competencies needed for optimal functioning within the educational, social and personal spheres relating to the work environment (Bholanath, 2007). These skills are utilized throughout an individual's lifespan to make informed choices and continuously manage career decisions (Lewin & Colley, 2011). The successful selection of a career is influenced not only by the socio-economic conditions, but also by the intrinsic profile of the individual, taking personality, potential and interests into account (Edwards & Quinter, 2011). It is the aim of career guidance to shape an individual's identity to be congruent with environmental needs (Maree & Beck, 2004); subsequently aligning subject choices at secondary school level accordingly (Van de Venter, 2006).

The implementation of a career guidance program ideally should be based on the needs of the learner, explored through constant reflection, and encompassing the holistic context within which the learner resides (Dabula & Makura, 2013). Research however reflects a paucity of empirical findings regarding learner perspectives on career guidance (Mittendorf, Den Brok &

Beijaard, 2010). The aforementioned is pivotal to improve the transition from theory to practice by incorporating the input of those the theory is aimed at, as being the case with Life Orientation and career guidance. With this in mind, the perspectives of the learner prove invaluable (Jacobs, 2011). With specific reference to the role of the Life Orientation teacher, Diale, Pillay and Fritz (2014) asserted that Life Orientation facilitators struggle to manage conflicting expectations from learners, parents, society and government. Identifying the expectations from learners would aid professional development of Life Orientation teachers and would clarify some misconceptions.

In light of the above, this article aims to integrate the pro-active learner-centered nature of career guidance with a platform for learners to share their experiences and expectations. As such this paper investigates the views of a community of grade 10 learners regarding the current and expected role Life Orientation teachers played with regard to subject choices. As career guidance forms a core pillar of the subject Life Orientation, this study is aimed at evaluating how career guidance is implemented at secondary schooling level. This will be done through first providing a theoretical framework. The research methodology, results and discussion will follow, after which a conclusion will be drawn with recommendations related thereto.

### **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

Traditionally, international quantitative theories of career counselling were used within the South African context uncritically (Maree, 2013). Resulting in an on-going debate in recent decades that career theory, practice and assessment has been subjugated by adopted western, individualized methodologies (McMahon & Watson, 2009; Watson & Kuit, 2007). As a way forward a systems theory perspective has been proposed to investigate the contextual dynamics influencing career choice which is consistent with international trends underscoring a constructivist paradigm (Savickas, 2001; McMahon & Watson, 2009). Van der Vyver and Oswald (2011) indicated that the Systems Theory Framework (STF) proposed by Patton and McMahon (2006) allows for the broader context in which learners exist to be taken into consideration. Thus the STF attempts to infuse school-based career guidance with a theoretical framework which makes provision for the individual as well as the context in which the individual exist (Patton & McMahon, 2006). As such the STF is deemed a dynamic open system comprising out of content and process influences. Content influences subsume inherent personal qualities and characteristics as well as the interaction between the before mentioned with the external environment on an individual, environmental or societal level. Content influences refer to recursiveness (viz. interaction between influences), depending on change over time and chance (McMahon & Watson, 2009). Interaction between the inherent characteristics of the learner and the intervention by Life Orientation teachers can be categorized as a content influence on a societal level.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The theoretical underpinning finds expression in the qualitative narrative storied approach taken in the research methodology. The before mentioned approach has been advocated as part of the constructivist paradigm implored by many researchers in the field of career development (e.g. Eloff, 2002; Fritz & Beekman, 2007; Maree, 2007; Maree & Molepo, 2006; McMahon & Watson, 2009).

#### **Participants and procedure**

This study made use of a two-tailed data collection method. Participants came from seven secondary schools within the Mangaung area, capital of the Free State Province. The final sample consisted of 430 participants, who were mostly female (n = 274) and 155 male respondents. While the majority of respondents were between 15 and 17 years of age, 24 of the final sample were older than 17 and 17 respondents were between 12 and 14 years. Afrikaans was the dominant language as indicated by 235 respondents, while 165 spoke an indigenous language at native level. Thirty respondents indicated English as their primary language. The language

distribution of the sample is in accordance with the language distribution of the population since both the white and the coloured population within the Free State speak the aforementioned language. Twenty-nine respondents were categorized, according to their indication, in the high socio-economic strata, 22 under low and the remaining majority in the middle socio-economic category.

With reference to the procedure a random sample was drawn from a list obtained of all secondary schools located within the Mangaung area. While every fifth school drawn formed part of the initial random sample, some of the schools opted not to take part in the study and subsequently seven secondary schools were included in the final sample. The consent forms and data collection instruments were handed out to the grade 10 learners of the selected schools. Convenience sampling is found in how data collection depended on the learners being present on that specific day. A total of 430 respondents formed part of the final sample.

### **Data collection instrument**

Five open-ended questions were posed to learners of which a narrative motivation formed the response. An example of one of the questions is: "what suggestions can you make to improve the help your Life Orientation teacher gave you concerning job and subject choices?" A large amount of data was accumulated, and for this reason the focus of this paper will be on one of the questions namely: "In what way has the help your Life Orientation teacher gave you influence the subjects you have chosen?"

### **Data analysis**

The discourse obtained through the written narratives was examined by means of qualitative thematic analysis. Themes emerged through induction after which main and sub-themes were identified through recursive processes. In each case relevant quotes elaborate further on the specific thematic division. The analysis of data was done by two external statistical analysis consultants, while the main researcher confirmed the results in order to achieve final consensus.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained at various levels. Firstly, ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Committee of the Higher Education Institution where the researcher was working at the time the research was conducted. The primary step involved registration of the study with the Free State province's Department of Basic Education. Next, the governing body provided written consent before the school's principal provided the next level of consent. After the primary gatekeepers' consent was received, consent forms were sent to the guardians of the respondents who needed to sign and give further permission. Gate keeper's consent was obtained on multiple levels ascribed to the fact that the respondents were minors. The aim, purpose and outcome of the study were explained to the responding parties while clear reference was made that participation was anonymous and not obligatory. Finally, respondents were also assured that no harm, physical or psychological, would befall them through participating in the study.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 361 questionnaires with qualitative responses were captured and used in the data analysis. Two main categories emerged the first being the actual activity or role of the teacher (if described by the respondent) and the second being the consequence, outcome or change the learner experienced as a result of the intervention i.e. life orientation. Where appropriate responses were coded in both streams (for example an activity and a result were coded if both were described by the respondent) and each response could also be coded more than once in a stream (i.e. a respondent might have described two roles the teacher played and thus both were coded in the activity or stream). The codes for activities and roles the teacher played, as well

as for the outcomes, results and changes was not predetermined. These codes were developed during the analysis process after first reading the full set of responses in detail. This approach allowed the codes to emerge from the data rather than determining how the data matched a set of predetermined codes.

### **Theme 1: Activity or role of the Life Orientation teacher**

Of the 361 respondents, the responses of 289 included a description of the teacher's role or an activity initiated by the teacher as having influenced their subject choice. A summary of the sub-themes that emerged with reference to the role and or activity of the teacher with a short description of the types of responses coded under each will be highlighted below. An example of an extract from a learner typical of each code is also provided.

#### *Not helpful*

This category included responses from learners that indicated that their teacher was not helpful in the selection of their subjects. This included responses where learners indicated they made the decision for themselves, their parents assisted, other teachers assisted or they were assisted by outside professional services (e.g. psychologists). These also included responses where learners indicated it was not yet helpful, but might be in the future. Typical responses subsumes: "She didn't talk about the subjects and she didn't influence me at all"; "None. My family helped me choose my subjects" and "Our teacher wasn't very clear about our subject choices, we mainly chose it ourselves"

#### *Guidance and advice*

This sub-theme included responses from learners that showed how the teacher guided or advised them in the decision making process. This is typically when the learner referred to the assistance the teacher gave "me" as opposed to "us"; but not exclusively. Guidance and advice extends beyond providing information in that it often reflects interaction and an iterative process. Responses that were coded under this sub-category included: "She help me in that if I want to go and study I must choice the right subjects and that my subjects that I choice will lead me to my future" and "She asks me which job I have in mind after I told her she give me subject options before subjects selection. She also told me my strengths and weaknesses and it helped me"

#### *Provision of information*

This category included responses from the learners that showed how the teacher provided them with information. This information was about careers, future studies, the job market etc. Typical responses in this category included "the teacher told us". Information providing is frequently associated with the information disseminated to a group or the whole class, although not exclusively so. As such one respondent wrote: "She gave me information on which jobs you can apply to with certain subjects." Another respondent indicated that: "She told us everything about the university and what subjects we need to apply for a job and to go and study"

#### *Aptitude tests*

This category included all responses from learners that referred to the teacher arranging for or administering aptitude tests. It excludes references where learners went for aptitude testing outside of the Life Orientation context or curriculum. This stance was illustrated in the following quotes: "We did an aptitude test on which subjects are most applicable to us, and it has helped us a lot" and "She has made me aware of my personality and interests by using aptitude tests."

#### *Motivation and support*

This category of responses subsumed references from respondents as to how the teacher has provided support and motivation to them during the process of making their decision. Motivation and support references are mutually exclusive from guidance and advice in that

they speak to the emotional or inspirational aspect of the teacher's role. Examples subsumed "I was stressing about whether or not I have chosen the right subjects so she showed me the requirements and helped to reassure myself that I have chosen the correct subjects" and "She has motivated me throughout my Grade 9 year and that is how she has influenced the subjects I have chosen. She is always there for her learners and always listens if something bothers you"

#### *Generic positive influence*

This category of responses includes references by the learner to the positive impact of the teacher, but without providing sufficient detail to classify the response under any of the other categories as can be illustrated in the following extracts: "It helped me in a lot of ways" and "Very good."

#### *Class activities*

This category of responses refers to activities and or projects the teacher initiated to assist students in the process of making subject choices. For example: "We did a project about the careers we want to go into which included the subjects you need to get accepted to the university"

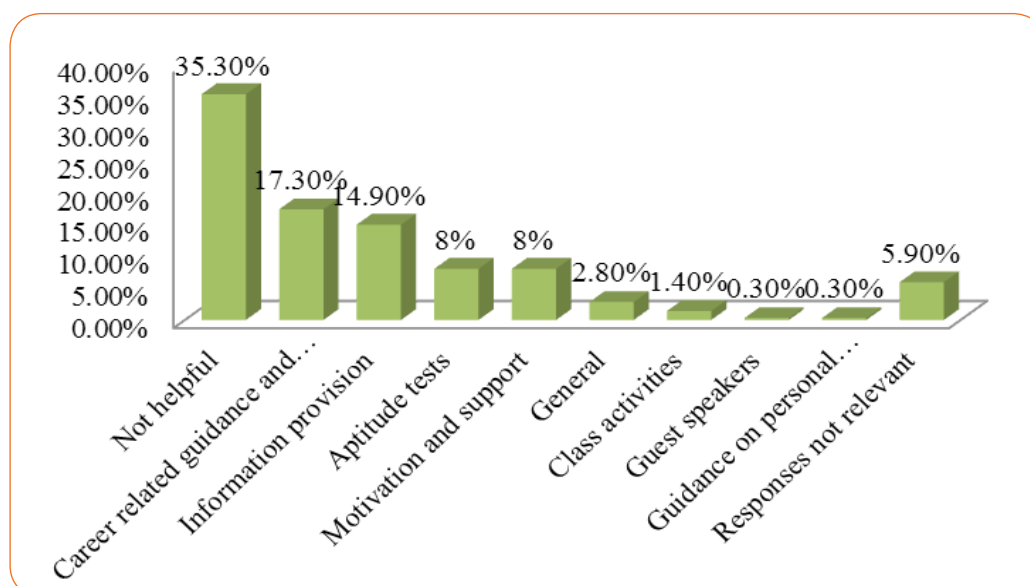
#### *Guest speakers*

This category includes references to outside guest speakers arranged by the teacher to address the learners for example: "They let people from universities come speak to us, and test our IQ so that we will know which jobs are most suitable to us"

#### *Guidance on personal development*

This category includes references from respondents that suggest the role the teacher played extended beyond making subject choices to broader personal development and growth. As such one respondent wrote: "In a positive way because I now know that the subjects that I have chosen is suitable for whatever job I want to do. She has helped me in every possible way because of her help I now have a positive outlook on life and always do my best not only at school but my social life as well as the choices I make."

The graph below depicts the number of codes per role or activity (expressed as a percentage).



**Figure 1:** Role and activities by the teacher to assist in subject choices (n = 289)

From the graph it is evident that for the highest percentage of respondents, their teacher was not helpful when making their subject choices. Just over a third of the sample indicated a response along these lines. The two primary roles that the teacher played were to provide information (14.9%) and to offer guidance and advice (17.3%). Offering motivation and support and the process of facilitating aptitude tests are the two secondary roles (8% each) that emerged from



the respondents. The majority of the respondents only referred to one role the teacher played, although 9 learners indicated more than one role which primarily (n=6) referred to aptitude testing and an additional role.

## **Theme 2: The consequence, outcome or change as result of the intervention**

Of the 361 participants, the responses of 214 describe the result, outcome or change that transpired from their teachers' inputs. A total of 25 sub-themes emerged during the analysis process. In order to enhance understanding of the findings these categories were condensed where possible and then categorized according to a smaller number of broader clusters. A summary of these sub-themes and the codes associated with each are elaborated on in the next section. Please take note that for the individual codes a short description of the types of responses coded under each is provided. An example of an extract from a learner typical of each code was also given.

### *Connecting subject choice to future*

Under this sub-theme two distinct categories emerged namely general and career-related futures. With reference to the first mentioned this grouping comprises of responses where learners show how their teacher has helped them to link their subject choices to the future, but no specific reference is given to a career or field of study – only to the future in general. In light of this one respondent wrote: “It influenced the subjects that I have chosen in a good way because I know that I have chosen the right subjects for my future one day.” When considering the career-related future mentioned the grouping included responses where learners show how their teacher has helped them to link their subject choices to the future, specifically relating to their choice of career or future job. One respondent indicated that: “I do civil and IGO at school and my life orientation teacher talked to our class about careers and since I have a passion for the IGO subject I decided to do engineering.” An additional grouping that can be classified under career-related guidance subsumed references to field of study. This category includes responses where learners show how their teacher has helped them to link their subject choices to the future, specifically relating to the intended field of study post-secondary school. As such a respondent wrote: “It has opened my eyes about what subjects I needed for me to get into a particular university to study what I want to become.” Moreover respondents also referred to the job market. This classification consist of responses where learners showed how their teacher has helped them to link their subject choices to the future, specifically making choices based on trends in the job market. For example: “I saw that there are many job opportunities in that field plus South Africa has a shortage of CA's and engineers”

### *Congruence between subject choice and personality*

Two separate classifications emerged from the data analysis viz. preferences and interests as well as personal strengths. The classification that deals with preferences and interests included responses where learners specified how their teacher played a role in them selecting subjects based on their own likes, preferences, beliefs, interests or passions. Narratives to this effect subsumed “She told us that we have to do what we love the most and I am doing the subjects that I really love!” and “It gave me confidence because it showed me even if I didn't choose pure math's I can still pursue my dream of becoming a professional chef like Gordon Ramsey and chef Oliver.” Under personal strengths responses where learners indicated how their teacher played a role in them selecting subjects based on their personal strengths or personality characteristics were included. For example “She inquired about the job I have in mind after which she provided me with subject options before choosing my subjects. She also informed me about my strengths and weaknesses and it assisted me.”

### *Personal gains*

Under the sub-theme personal gains three categories aroused namely self-motivation, self-confidence and self-knowledge. The grouping self-motivation refers to responses where

learners illustrated how their self-motivation has increased or grown stronger as a result of their interactions with the Life Orientation teacher. The motivation is linked specifically to study or career related matters. To illustrate this one respondent wrote: “My life orientation teacher has made me realize that with hard work and perseverance I shall succeed and if I don’t succeed it determines how strong I can be moving forward from disappointment.” The second aspect self-confidence refers to responses where learners illustrated how their self-confidence has increased or grown stronger as a result of their interactions with the Life Orientation teacher. The confidence relates specifically to their confidence around career or study related matters. As such one respondent indicated that: “She help me to be confident and believe in myself that I can do it” as well as “It has help me become more confident in the career I envision choosing, and also helped me know the advantages and disadvantages associated with the choices I’ll be making.” Lastly, with reference to self-knowledge responses where learners illustrated how their self-confidence has increased or grown stronger as a result of their interactions with the Life Orientation teacher were taken into consideration. The self-knowledge relates specifically to their relating new knowledge about themselves to career and/or study related matters. An example that illustrate this sentiment includes: “The teacher helped us to identify our personalities, which is important for a certain job” as well as “My life orientation teacher has helped us/me to identify some of our weaknesses and strong points”

#### *Personal growth*

Four classifications were identified under personal growth viz. defining future goals and direction, decision making ability, defining personal values and general aspects pertaining to personal growth. With reference to the first mentioned this grouping included responses from learners that show how the life orientation teacher has helped them shape their future career direction. This is different from the “Linked to future career” category in that this category represents the process of determining direction as opposed to linked subjects to an already identified direction. As such respondents noted: “A big way, I want to be a doctor because of the things I learned” as well as “Because he always talks about high top jobs, he really inspired me to do Chartered Accountant. He has subjects in school that an Accountant can choose from”

With reference to decision making ability responses from learners that show how life orientation has helped them improve their own decision making abilities were captured. This included for example: “It changed the way I reasoned and my future looks very good”. When considering the classification related to defining personal values the category subsumed responses from participants that reflects how the life orientation facilitator has assisted them to define their own set of personal values and beliefs. This sentiment is reflected in the following narrative: “It has helped me to find my interests and values. Now I know what career I want to do and I’ve chosen the correct subjects” The generic responses included in this sub-theme subsumed responses that related to areas of personal growth not specified in the three classifications above, including assuming personal responsibility for one’s life. Extracts from respondents included: “I saw that I could set my standards high and that I have responsibilities to achieve my goals.”

#### *Motivation*

Two aspects came to light during the analysis with relation to motivation viz. motivation to study harder and to do further research about prospective careers. The motivation to study harder is distinguished from self-motivation above in that it refers specifically to how their motivation to work harder at school has come as a result of the intervention from the life orientation teacher. It is more specific than the motivation described by learners in the self-motivation category. For example: “She’s encouraged me to actually work hard in the subjects that I have chosen because they will be pivotal in achieving my dreams and following my goals.” The Life Orientation teacher also encouraged respondents to do additional research

about respective careers. The aforementioned category refers to learners who were motivated to conduct additional research about careers of interest as a result of the role their life orientation teacher played. For example: “She instructed us about the options that come with the subjects and on my own I Googled the information even further and came to a conclusion relating to the job I want to do in the future”

#### *School-related*

Two aspects are highlighted in this sub-theme namely content information and enabled choice. The first mentioned grouping refers to the teacher providing information to the respondents regarding the content of the different subjects at secondary school level in order for them to understand what the “subject will be about” if they decide to choose it. An example depicting this sentiment includes: “They helped me to understand more about the subjects I have chosen, and what you will be able to do if you have chosen that subjects” With reference to enabled choice this category refers to the role the teacher played in actually assisting the learner to make subject choices reflecting a more focused approach than just providing general content related information for example “She helped to choose my subjects” as well as “It helped me choose the right subjects.”

#### *Reflection*

The interventions by the Life Orientation teachers were also the impetus behind respondents’ reflection on the future as well as generally. Future reflection subsumed instances where learners indicated that life orientation led them to reflect on the future implications of their subject choices. For example: “Yes, it has made me think a lot about the future because the things they teach us made me think in terms of the future not only the present. It helps us look at what will be most beneficial and makes me happy.” General reflection echoed instances where the learner indicated reflection, but the examples were lacking the specificity suggested in the category above for example “She told me to take time and think about my subject choices and do a lot of research.”

#### *Generic activity related outcomes*

This sub-theme included all other responses that did not relate to the sub-categories above, including improved study habits; improved time management etc. For example “How to study and manage my time”

#### *Negative outcomes*

This category reflects negative outcomes described by the learners and overly prescriptive approaches by teachers subsuming “Not a lot because I chose the wrong subject’s for what I want to do when I grow up” and “She told us not to choose any subject.”

Figure 2 overleaf illustrates the number of codes per result, outcome or change that transpired (expressed as a percentage of 214). As can be seen from this figure, the greatest influence on subject choice has been the link respondents made with their futures – in general (12%) and specifically related to their careers (39%). This strong link between career and subject choice is reinforced by the 7% of respondents who indicated that the help provided by their life orientation teacher resulted in them defining their own career goals and future direction. The influence of the aptitude tests described in the section above can be seen by the learners making the linkages between their personalities/strengths and their subject choices (6%) and the gains in self-knowledge (6%). As many as 10% indicated that the life orientation teacher had played a role in their choosing subjects based on interests, preferences, values and personal goals (in contrast to a hypothesized haphazard approach to subject selection or sustaining the status quo, taking the employment market into consideration, taking instruction from legal guardians etc.).



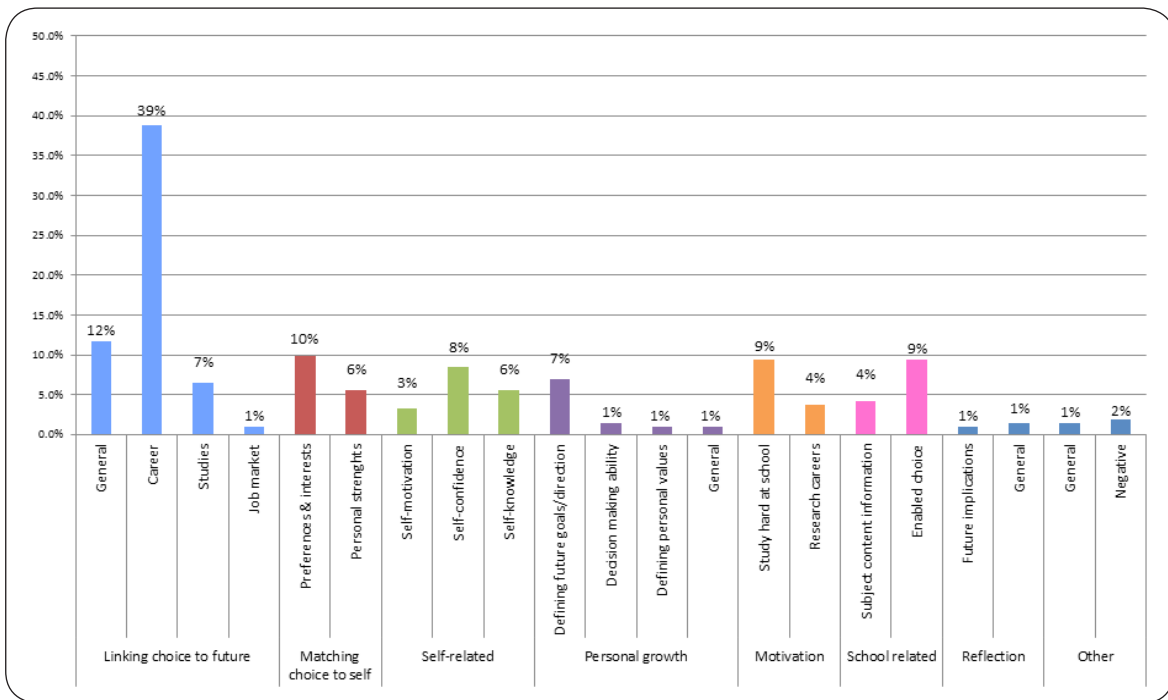


Figure 2: Results, outcomes and changes resulting from teacher inputs in subject choice (n = 214)

For a smaller number of respondents the impact of the life orientation teacher was on the immediate context, with 9% indicating the influence of the teacher on enabling them to make the right choices and 4% mentioning how the teacher provided details of the content of subjects. The motivation to study harder (10%) and the indication of students conducting their own additional research on various careers (4%) are positive outcomes flowing from the help provided by the life orientation teachers. Although limited in their number, there is evidence of various other positive outcomes such as taking personal responsibility, improved decision making, and personal reflection.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important finding of the research study was that 35.3% of learners indicated that the Life Orientation teacher were not helpful in providing assistance with specific reference to career guidance and subject choices. A further 5.9% of responses were not relevant to the topic under discussion. The finding of the current study support those of Jacobs (2011) who indicated that Life Orientation as a whole did not appear to be effective in inducing behavior change in learners. Respondents in the study mentioned indicated that they acquired no new knowledge. A study by Theron (2008) found that learners from previously disadvantaged schools have a higher appreciation for Life Orientation. Consequently, it would be interesting to determine if there is a difference between traditional Model-C grade 10 learners and those from previously disadvantaged areas. The most important role the Life Orientation teachers played subsumed guidance and advice, provision of information, facilitation of aptitude tests as well as provision of motivation and support. Findings of the current study support those of Pillay (2012) who reflected on the skills, characteristics and support networks of Keystone Life Orientation teachers which underscored the important role of the provision of information and motivation as a secondary function. Despite this, the aforementioned roles of the Life Orientation teacher were not perceived as influential in subject selection by the learners, thus the practical implications thereof are limited. This in turn reflects and supports the current discrepancy between theory and practice (Chireshe, 2012), and adds to current research aiming to identify factors which influence the overall effectiveness of the subject Life Orientation.

Some caveats should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Firstly, the research study was conducted in a specific region. Consequently, caution is advised when making inferences to other regions. In addition, the questionnaire was administered in English which were not the mother tongue of the majority of respondents. Adolescents tend to be unrealistic in their perceptions and views therefore the results of the current study should be viewed with care and cannot be the only measurement of the effectiveness of Life Orientation.

In accordance with previous research done in the North-West province it is recommended that the subject Life Orientation with specific reference to career guidance be investigated in other regions in order to establish whether the results of the current study can be validated. It is also recommended that the training of Life Orientation teachers to facilitate and administer aptitude tests be investigated. As per the results of the current study aptitude tests were done by Life Orientation teachers. To administer aptitude test psychometric practitioners must be registered at the Health Practitioners Council of South Africa. Furthermore, it is recommended that the theory that the cultural differences between learners should be taken into consideration. This is in accordance with recommendations made in earlier research done in the North West province as well as the Western Cape.

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**Citation:** P Jonck & EH Swanepoel (2015) Exploring the perceived role of Life Orientation teachers with reference to career guidance provided to Grade 10 learners in the Free State, South Africa. IJHSSE 2(5), pp: 229-239.