

Is there a case for a programme of continuing education for school leavers?

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Introduction

The concept 'continuing education' is always a topical issue in a country. Every country is continuously seeking ways of improving educational programmes for the populace. The programmes provided at a particular time in the life of a country are dependent on a number of factors including the prevailing views in the society, the economic climate and research findings. Thus, at a particular time a country may focus on introducing certain programmes, such as an early childhood education programme, or a gifted and talented programme. At other times the focus could be on a special group such as the mentally or physically challenged, or a group of school leavers. It is this latter group that is of interest in this paper. Although I am aware of the academic and other benefits of continuing education for school leavers, my level of awareness extends to the social benefits as well. It has been well documented in the literature that young people who are not meaningfully employed are at risk for potential problems in the society ranging from acts such as stealing, fighting, disturbing the peace, to drug abuse, sexual abuse, gang membership and other antisocial behaviours. School leavers are therefore in a crucial time of life, a time of values clarification, where they either develop values and a social identity consistent with societal expectations or alternatively, a social identity inconsistent with societal expectations.

My interest in this area originates from my work with older students who are referred for psycho-educational consultation. Informal interviews revealed that several students have a good understanding of careers and career options, but identified several mitigating circumstances that affect access to continuing education. So, although several readily embrace continuing education there are barriers preventing them from doing so. As a result their education officially ends when they leave high school, whether or not they have attained their career goal(s).

The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether there is a case for a programme of continuing education for school leavers. This investigation seeks to identify whether the scope of continuing education needs to be widened and the contents diversified or reshaped to ensure access to continuing education, regardless of circumstances. The investigation will also provide an idea of students' perception of continuing education.

Literature Review

The school leaver

The student population graduating from high school in the Cayman Islands has a mean age of 17 years and 6 months. At the end of high school a student may graduate with passes in CXC, GCE, or IGCSE or obtain a school-leaving certificate (COEA or Certificate of Educational Achievement). The qualifications received determine eligibility for college either locally or overseas, and for employment in traditional sectors such as tourism and banking and other service enterprises. The employment offered may be skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. Although the decisions made regarding jobs are not permanent, but formative, the school leaver is on the beginning of a path that will serve as the foundation for succeeding stages of adult life.

The school leaver as a young adult

The school leaver is also 'in transition', from adolescence to adulthood and the process includes emotional, physical,

social, and cognitive development. These areas are not mutually exclusive and are considered critical by all, including sociologists, psychologists, and educators. Erikson (cited in Rice, 2001) in his theory, the eight stages of man, refers to the adolescent stage as Identify vs Role confusion; a stage that either facilitates the development of a strong sense of self or confusion about one's identify. The development of a strong sense of self has implications for a positive self-concept, school achievement, and career goals. Alternatively, role confusion may result in juvenile delinquency, anorexia, bulima, drug use, sexual abuse and other antisocial behaviours, which are inconsistent with societal expectations.

The school leaver as a young adult learner

The school leaver, as a young adult learner, must participate in the process of lifelong education. This is important in a world where knowledge is rapidly increasing. Education throughout life enables one to maintain cognitive skills, morale, self-image and abilities to deal with the complex problems of the future Rice (2001). Rice's statement encompasses the major goals of education, not only from an academic perspective, but also from a social and emotional perspective.

On these Islands, continuing education for the school leaver is available mainly through programmes at the Community College, the International College of the Cayman Islands and on the job. These courses are available on a full time or part time basis. In these institutions the approach to teaching is consistent with international standards. Over the years, government, administration and parents encourage the school leaver, through public awareness programmes (media advertising) financial assistance and other means to further their education after high school. As a result, yearly, several students of varying abilities gain admission to these institutions. However, there is a small, but visible number of school leavers of varying abilities who do not continue their education, because of a variety of factors or barriers.

Informal discussions with several of these school leavers have led this researcher to describe them as a group that is not motivated to further their education because "...it is just like school". They also complained that the classes are boring and formal and some of the subjects are not relevant to their immediate career needs. They would rather be placed in a class where they are involved in activities; than listening, gathering information, and studying for an examination. Additionally, some reported that they are not interested in certain subjects offered and would rather subjects that do not involved working at the same pace as other individuals.

Given the perception of continuing education among some school leavers, it is important to identify whether the barrier to continuing education is mainly related to their learning styles. Learning style is an approach that dictates the way in which one acquires knowledge. A similar definition was proposed by Krahe (cited in Stroot *et al.*, 1998), who suggested that learning style is an individual's approach to responding to and processing learning events as he or she experiences them. These and other definitions in the literature show that all individuals have a preferred approach to learning (Winters, 1995 & Wang, 1996). This does not mean that the individual is locked into one style, but the individual has a preferred or predominant style. In fact, Kolb (cited in Stroot *et al.*, 1998) reported that learning styles run on a continuum.

Learning styles are commonly placed in three major categories: visual, auditory and tactile/kinesthetic. The visual learners learn through seeing. The teacher's body language, and facial expression are important to the learner, likewise the presentation of information in pictures and visual displays. The auditory learners learn mainly through listening. The teacher's tone of voice, and speed of information sharing are important to the learner. The learner prefers to carry a tape recorder to class rather than taking copious notes. The tactile/kinesthetic learners learn mainly through moving, doing and touching. They learn best through the hands-on approach and enjoy learning opportunities that allow them to explore their environment.

Over the decades concerns have been raised that some learners find it difficulty to integrate one modality of learning with another (Chalfant & Scheffelin, 1969). In the teaching-learning dynamics, ideally, the information received through one learning style sometimes needs to be transferred or integrated to make learning meaningful. For example, in the reading process, the 'child' learner who is able to identify letters (visual learning style), but fails to integrate the letters identified with sound equivalents (auditory learning style), is likely to develop a reading problem. Complex learning, including learning at the tertiary level usually requires the integration of learning styles. It is possible that

some school leavers fail to further their education, because they feel that their own learning style cannot cope with the demands of the task.

Given that the age group in this paper is in the transition phase; from childhood to adulthood, it is also important to examine in brief, current thinking on adult learning styles. One researcher, Knowles (1984), sometimes called the father of adult learning, in differentiating between the learning styles of adults and children identified a number of assumptions on the adult learner. Cantor (1992) and Cranton (1992) reported that Knowles' assumed that adult learning should be, autonomous, goal directed, relevant, practical and related to life experiences. Another group of researchers, The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), proposed a model based on well-established traits such as emotional, environmental, sociological and physical (cited in Stroot *et al.*, 1998).

The research findings on the adult learner contain important issues to consider when teaching adults. Therefore, given the challenges of teaching to the learning styles of a class, and the challenges of teaching students 'in transition', from adolescents to adulthood (young adults), the following research questions were developed.

1. Do all school leavers fully understand the concept, 'continuing education'?
2. What are some of the barriers to continuing education?
3. To what extent does learning style represent a barrier to continuing education?

Method

Sample

To answer the research questions, 45 Year 12 students of mixed ability and 6 school leavers were randomly selected. The forty-five students selected from a total of 350 Year 12 students originated from three of the 16 tutor groups. Their mean age was 17 years 3 months. The six school-leavers were selected from the researcher's psycho-educational register. Only students who were referred for consultation on other than academic issues were included. Additionally, they had to have completed 9 or more years of schooling and be officially school leavers. That is, they must have been at least 16 years old. Those selected were between ages 17-24 years. Permission was obtained from the Education Department, and principal to administer the instruments. Permission was also obtained from the six school leavers to include their report in this paper.

Instrumentation

Instruments included a 12-item questionnaire, administered to determine students' perception of continuing education. A chart/local interest inventory arranged according to Holland's Career Interest Inventory was also administered to students to help to identify their local occupational choice. A case study compiled from interviews and self reports of school leavers were used to determine some of the barriers to continuing education.

Procedure

Prior to administering 12-item questionnaire, it was pilot tested and items with low means (below 2.0) and low correlations (below .30) were withdrawn from the scale. The local interest inventory and questionnaire were administered as a single activity on the same day and took about 10 minutes to administer. To complete the case study for the six school leavers, this researcher visited school leavers at home, in the workplace and two school leavers visited the office. Prior to obtaining information for the case, the purpose of the investigation was explained to each school leaver, and a letter was presented seeking their permission to include their case in this paper. As a result of their responses in the interview and self-report, the case was written and then read to each school leaver for approval.

Design and Data analysis

To determine whether all school leavers fully understood the concept, 'continuing education,' statistical procedures

including an item analysis, and chi square test were applied. A frequency count, to identify future career aspirations among school leavers, was carried out. To identify barriers to continuing education, the case studies were analyzed and patterns and themes identified. Specifically, themes were identified to determine whether the school leavers' learning style formed major barriers to their participation in tertiary education.

Results

On the questionnaire (see Appendix) the results indicated that students in their last year of high school understood the concept, continuing education. Both genders understood the concept equally well, $\chi^2=0.53$ (see Tables 1 and 2). The interest inventory revealed that these students about to leave school do think of future careers, however, there was no overwhelming preference for a particular type of career (see Appendix, section B). On the case studies the following themes were identified as consistent: desire to continue education, school leavers' learning styles, career goals, employment potential, family's support and academic preparedness.

Table 1: Perceptions of Continuing Education		
Scores	Description of scores	Total
45-60	Very good perception	16
30-44	Perception is fairly good	28
15-29	Lacks a balanced perception	1
		45

Table 2: Perceptions of Continuing Education According to Gender				
		Boys	Girls	
Scores	Description of scores			Total
45-60	Very good perception	7	9	16
30-44	Perception is fairly good	14	14	28
15-29	Lacks a balanced perception	1	0	1
				45

$\chi^2=0.53$.

In relation to the desire for continuing education, all participants voiced the need to continue their education. However, while two participants were willing to continue their education in any of the current institutions, two explained that they were not comfortable with the kind of teaching, and along with two other participants explained that they do not think that they can cope with continuing education at that level. Those who commented on the 'teaching' seemed to believe that the learning style did not match the current teaching-learning environment.

The learning styles of students were reflected in their career goals. Participants included typing, computer graphic engineer, certified electrician, electrical repairs, motor mechanics, landscaping, police, and flight attendant as their major career goals. Most of these career goals have implications for an integrative learning style, but a visual learning style, appears dominant.

While there was a desire for all participants to continue their education, over 60% appears to be academically unprepared for the current offering, because they explained that they do not think that they can cope with continuing education at that level. In fact only two had IGCSE subject: one passed English and mathematics, along with other subjects and the other did not pass English, but has other subjects.

Family's support was another key factor in this case. All participants had issues in the family that could affect their chances of obtaining continuing education, and only one of the six cases reported that the family would provide

financial support. Overall, family support would be difficult because of lack of cooperation from key family members, a terminally ill family member and budgetary priorities.

Employment potential, while continuing education, was also another barrier for participants. Currently, two male participants have full time employment and one has a part time job. These are all unskilled jobs. However they all reported that they did not like their jobs and the two with full time employment were desperately trying to find another job. Unfortunately the females were unemployed partly because they were unskilled, partly because they did not think anyone would employ them without a school-leaving certificate and because two of them have to take care of their children.

Research Implications

The findings show that students in their last year of school understood the concept of continuing education, and were aware of the various kinds of career opportunities available. Although in a case study research generalization can be an issue, some barriers to continuing education identified in these include: learning styles, academic unpreparedness, family support and employment opportunities while studying.

While it was expected that the major barrier would be participants' learning style, this was not supported. Instead, it appears that the major barrier was academic unpreparedness. There seems to be a need for the introduction of 'another education level' (between high and tertiary level). This level would raise the level of preparedness of students for tertiary education. It was noted that the career clusters of school leavers, suggest the need for a predominantly visual learning style, although an integrative style is involved. Further, school leavers' career choices have implications for a course content that includes vocational and technical education, and a learning format that is activity based, goal-oriented, and self-directed. This format reflects some important characteristics of the adult learner. Additionally, the study also shows that financial support is needed to ensure continuing education for some school leavers. The introduction of an educational level between high school and tertiary level education would complete the programme of continuing education for all school leavers. Such a programme would also help to circumvent potential problems associated with role confusion, as explained by Erickson.

A programme at this level, intermediary level, would not be unique. In other countries similar programmes were developed. One such is the YALP or Young Adult Learners' Partnership (McNeil, 2003). YALP "researches and develops effective approaches to learning and personal development among young adults aged 16-25 on the margins of education, training and employment, with the purpose of fostering their capability and their integration as young workers, parents and citizens" (<http://www.niace.org.uk/research/YALP/>).

Replication of this study could help to provide additional support for an intermediary level between high school and the tertiary level.

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Appendix

Questionnaires: Continuing Education and Career Choice

Gender

Date of Birth

A. Perceptions of Continuing Education

Instructions: Read each item below and rate yourself on a 1-4 scale as follows:

- 4 = strongly agree (SA)
- 3 = agree (A)
- 2 = disagree (D)
- 1 = strongly disagree (SD)

Items		SA	A	D	SD
1	I will be better prepared for the job market if I continue my education after school				
2	It is not important for people to define worth in terms of the job they do				
3	I will earn a better salary if I continue my education after school				
4	When I graduate from high school I will be too tired to continue with anymore studies				
5	Continuing education should include studies in English, especially reading				
6	Continuing education should include woodwork, home economics and other vocational/practical subjects				
7	Continuing education should include subjects such as information technology, and other computer related subjects				
8	Continuing education should include subjects, such as social studies and world geography				
9	To continue my education, easy access to my classes is more important than the setting (kind of building) in which the classes are held				
10	When I am ready to continue my education, it does not matter where classes are held, whether at the community college, a hall, or in my former school				
11	I would select a programme to continue my education that includes week-ends				
12	When I am ready to continue my education, I will select a programme that will allow time off from				

	work during a work week				
	Total				

B. Career Choice

Identify your **five best job choices** from the table below.

If you are not satisfied with a choice from the table, add your choice in the **Your Personal Choice** column, and in the row that matches the occupational choice on the chart.

Personality Type	Occupational Choice	Your Personal Choice
Realistic	Air conditioning technician Air traffic controller, farming fire fighter, painter, plumber, mechanic electrician gardening, nursery worker (plant), welder, police officer, fishing, bus driver emergency medical technician, diving, water skiing, carpenter (woodwork)	
Investigative	Airline pilot, pharmacist, computer operator, electronics technician, medical laboratory technician, radiologist, X-ray technician	
Artistic	Fashion designer, art teacher, drama teacher, dance teacher, music teacher, journalist/reporter, musician, photographer, straw work--straw hats, bags, flower growing, floral arrangement, poetry, singer, story teller	
Social	Teacher, hairdresser, scout master, counselor, nurse, librarian, social worker, child care worker, dental assistant, minister of religion, politician, teachers' aide	
Enterprising	Sales person, real estate agent, lawyer/attorney, banker manager, business manager, travel agency clerk, radio/TV announcer, salesperson, tourist, warehouse manager, tour guide	
Conventional	Accountant, accounts clerk, business teacher, file clerk, receptionist/secretary, typist, cook, leatherwork, sewing, weaving, crocheting	

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