

PERCEPTION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ON THE CHOICE OF GEOGRAPHY AS A COURSE OF STUDY IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The study examined the perception of secondary school students towards the study of Geography in higher institutions. Specifically, the study examined the influence of home background, gender, quality of teaching and career opportunity on the choice of Geography as a course of study in the higher institution. Descriptive survey design was adopted in which primary data was used with the aid of well structured closed ended questionnaire. Population of the study consisted all secondary schools in Benin City. Six (06) secondary schools across three local government areas within Benin City; Oredo, Ikpoba Okha, and Egor local government areas were randomly selected comprising of three (03) public and three (03) private secondary schools. A sample size of 240 respondents was chosen through simple random sampling. Findings showed that there was significant influence of students' home background and gender on the perception of students on Geography as a course of study in higher institution. Career choice had no significant influence on students' perception of Geography as a course of study in higher institution. Based on these findings it was recommended that school authorities should ensure that regular career talk programmes are organized in their schools to expose the students to career options in geography. This will help to build their interest in the subject and subsequently encourage them to study it in higher institution; curriculum planners should improve the Geography curriculum to include current trends and contemporary practices in geography. This is to make the subject attractive to students.

Keywords: Perception, Secondary School Students, Choice of Geography, Course of Study, Higher Institutions

Introduction

Since the inception of humans, they have been taught ideas about the earth. They are always curious on how the earth, especially its surface and its land formation is formed. This formed the basis of Geography. At first, Geography was just studied to give explanation to why and how things came into existence and its phenomena (landforms, climate, etc) were defined. Later, the study of Geography broadened; the relationship between human beings and other habitats was studied as well, causing a change in the subjects' contents and methods. This change was as a result of geographer's knowledge, geographic conditions and level of development in all centuries till date (Nurettin, 2015).

When humans began settlement, population increased naturally because of the higher living standards. Because of these changes, people want to migrate to different places and gain new knowledge of

where they have gone. So they changed their life pattern due to topographic conditions. Some researches show that many years ago, human beings migrated from tropical region in South Africa and to the other continents except the Antarctic in late Pleistocene age (B.C. 25000) (Haggett, 2001).

Geographic explorations were the first steps that led to people's perception in the study of geography. When these explorations started most explorers went to unknown places. They discovered continents, learned climate types and vegetation. Some of them wrote some books about what they had seen after interactions with different civilizations. So, geographical knowledge supplies new perception about the world to people. After the industrial revolution, geographical perception changed and it is much more significant for the industry, because factories need raw materials for sustainable development. People need to know Geography to find better material sources. So definition of Geography changed again. Later, in schools, basic geographical phenomena like climate and vegetation types were taught. In addition, the concept of teaching pattern also changed. Geography has had a strong bond with fieldwork since the origin of the discipline; students went to the field and investigated topography.

In the 20th century, the study of Geography extended to human beings, because humans influence all other habitats. In most cases, this human influence could be damaging with respect to the environment, so geographical perception goes toward people's behaviours. People consume natural resources very quickly and need new areas to replenish. Geography was then divided into four main sub disciplines like physical Geography (geomorphology) human Geography (settlement), regional Geography (World Regional Geography) and Geography education.

Nowadays, perception of Geography has entirely changed and it directly influences human life. People watch television and see much news about natural disasters and climate change issues. If people want to influence these issues they have to know or recognize Geography. In the last decade, especially in developed countries, conception of Geography has changed. Teachers in developed countries try new teaching methods to help increase consciousness of Geography in schools because they understand the importance of the subject and the implications of its neglect or removal from the curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

Geography, earth and environmental sciences are very much in the media at present. There are a wide variety of natural history television programmes and the news regularly contains references to natural disasters, climate change, flooding, and so on. However, this coverage does not seem to translate to a high demand for higher education courses in these disciplines, most especially Geography in Nigeria; rather, the interest of students in the subject has dwindled over time and the number of students admitted into higher institutions in Nigeria to study Geography has reduced tremendously. For example at the University of Benin, 253 students were admitted into the Department of Geography and Regional Planning in the 2003/2004 academic session. Over the last ten years, there has been a steady decline in the admission status. For example, 2010/2011, 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014, 2014/2015, and 2015/2016 sessions had 55, 18, 72, 38, 33, and 64 students admitted respectively (Academic Planning Division, University of Benin, 2016).

Most of the students in the Department of Geography are not there by choice rather by their inability to secure admission in their chosen discipline. It is assumed that the reasons for the avoidance of Geography are deep-rooted and, because of this, secondary school students' perception towards Geography was assessed to ascertain a possible association between, students' home background, career choice, gender and the choice of Geography as a course of study in higher institutions. The thrust of the study, therefore, is an attempt to investigate the reasons for the apparent avoidance of Geography by secondary school students as a course of study in the higher institution.

In the light of the above, the following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- i. How do secondary school students' perceive Geography?

- ii. What home factors are responsible for students opting to study Geography?
- iii. How does gender influence the perception of students in the choice of Geography as a course of study at higher institutions?

Literature Review

Gestalt theorists proposed that the experiences and perceptions of learners have a significant impact on the way that they learn. The Gestalt theory hypothesizes that an individual's perception of stimuli has an effect in their response. If two individuals are exposed to identical stimuli, their reactions to it would be different depending on their past experience. According to this theory, the environment influences what one perceives which in turn influences how students learn or perceive things. Consequently, we hereby review literature on: perception of students on Geography as a course of study, gender and choice of courses and home background and choice of courses.

Perception of Students on Geography as a Course of Study

A study on students perception of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) carried out by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences (2007) led by Helen King found in their study that 'schools and teachers have an important influence on student's perception of GEES subjects and on education choices at 14+, 16+ years and beyond; practices in school affects the ways in which gender, social class and ethnicity influence subject choice; two-third of the students perceived Geography as being generally 'useful', many found it difficult to identify any real purpose for studying it and geological sciences as a career is not attractive to students browsing through career libraries as they are simply not familiar with the term.

A study by Verma and Deshpande (2016) on perception of students about choice of Geography as a course at Fiji National University (FNU), in which 120 final year secondary school students were purposively sampled from selected high schools in the metropolis found that the perception that these students have about Geography is generally not very high.

Gender and Perception of Student Choice of Courses

In more recent researches, a variety of researchers also found significant gender differences in attitudes towards, and interest in science, with girls losing interest faster than boys in secondary schools (Krapp, 2002; Trumper, 2006; Elster, 2007). Logan and Skemp (2008) indicate that gender differences were most likely to be connected with a number of variables related to classroom experiences, including pedagogical variables.

In Nigeria, this area has received some level of attention but worthy to note that perception of subjects based on gender varies from one culture to the other. Studies by Ogunleye (2002) showed that perception of science subjects by secondary school students depends on gender. However, Nwosu (2001) found that students' choice of science courses in higher institutions are not gender specific. Also, the studies by Ogunleye and Babajide (2011); Agommuoh and Nzewi (2003) lend credence to non-significant gender effect in perception of science as a course of study.

Home Background and Perception of Students' Choice of Courses

The home background can be divided into structural, attitudinal and process dimensions. The structural dimension refers to, among others, the occupational status, the educational level and income of the household head and size of the family. Hayes and Hopson (1997) as cited in Comfort, (2014) and Genberg (1991) see the parental factor as inevitable in influencing student's academic decision. Most parents often want their children to take their profession by encouraging them to offer certain subjects or a particular course in the university. Owuamanam (1992) states that often times, there is existing conflicts between Nigeria students, their parents and the society concerning the kind of occupation for which the young should be preparing for.

Jungen (2008) observes that parental influence factor is a force in determining choice of school subjects. In this study, there is strong tendency for students to enter into their father's occupation or related ones (profession). He further observed in the course of his study that 35% of sons of physical scientist choose subjects in physical science related disciplines compared to about 10% and 14% of sons of medical practitioners and social scientist respectively.

The educational background of parents will play a vital role in students' choice of school subjects. Parents with little or no educational qualification tend to give their children free hand in making academic decision. This is so because they have no knowledge of the right subject their children should offer. Also, another important area is the economic status of parents, which is an unavoidable factor in student's academic decision. Children from low income homes tend to read courses that have financial implications, while those from high income homes go for courses like law, medicine, architecture and so on because of their parents' capability. This implies that a student from poor economic background would aspire higher in life to choose subjects that will eventually lead them to occupation that pays better.

Method

The descriptive survey design was used. The population of this study was students in senior secondary. The sample was selected from students from 6 selected public and private schools in three local government areas (Oredo, Egor and Ikpoba-Okha) in Edo State. The total population of students in these schools were 55, 512 (Planning Division, Ministry of Education, Benin City 2017.). The multi stage sampling technique comprising of stratified and simple random sampling techniques was adopted in this study in order to allow for adequate representation. A total of forty (40) students were selected from each of the six secondary schools to make a total sample of two hundred and forty (240) students. The instrument used for the collection of data was the questionnaire which was designed by the researchers. Data was analysed using mean standard deviation for the research questions raised. A four-point nominal rating scale was used with nominal values assigned to them. The frequency scores for all the options from the respondents for a particular item was determined and its mean computed. The cut-off mark/point was 2.50. However, the research instrument has both positive and negative items. As a result, for positive items, 2.5 and above imply favourable perception and a mean below 2.5 implies unfavourable perception. For negative items, an item mean greater or equal to 2.5 imply 'unfavourable perception' while a mean less than 2.50 implies a 'favourable perception'.

Results

Research Question One: How do secondary school students' perceive geography?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation ratings of Students' Perception of Geography

S/N	Item	Students' perception of Geography		
		Mean	SD	Decision
1	I find Geography less useful than other subjects	2.39	1.04	Favourable perception
2	Geography is too difficult	2.03	1.13	Favourable perception
3	Geography is not a lucrative course in Nigeria	3.24	0.69	Unfavourable perception
4	Geography is very interesting	2.41	1.01	Unfavourable perception
5	Geography is too broad	3.25	0.77	Unfavourable perception

Table 1 shows that for items 1 and 2, the mean score or responses of 2.39 and 2.03 respectively implying favourable perception (being negative items) while item 3 and 5 with mean scores of 3.24 and 3.25 respectively implying unfavourable perception (being negative items). Item 4 which is the only positive item had mean score of 2.41 implying unfavourable perception. The implication here is that the students find

Geography less useful than other subjects; the subject of Geography is perceived as too difficult and uninteresting. However, for item 3 with a mean score of 3.24 implying unfavourable perception shows that the students perceive Geography as a lucrative course and for item 5 with a mean score of 3.25 implying unfavourable perception shows that the students do not perceive Geography as too broad. In concluding, the findings show that the students do not have an overall positive perception of Geography as a choice course of study.

Research Question Two: What home factors are responsible for students opting to study geography?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation ratings of Home Background Factors Responsible for Students' Choice of Geography

S/N	Item	<i>Students' perception of Geography</i>		
		Mean	SD	Decision
6	I want to study Geography as a course in the university because I want to pursue the same line of occupation like my parents	2.19	1.04	Unfavourable perception
7	My father wants me to study Geography in the university because it is what he studied also.	2.12	1.37	Unfavourable perception
8	My parents' low level of income may not enable me to study expensive courses like Medicine or Engineering	1.45	0.72	Favourable perception
9	Because of the large size of my family, my parents wants me to study Geography since it is less expensive.	1.68	1.21	Favourable perception
10	Because of my parents' love for Geography, I am encouraged to study the course.	2.15	1.71	Unfavourable perception

Table 2 shows that items 6, 7 and 10 are positive items and mean scores of 2.19, 2.12 and 2.15 respectively show unfavourable perception. The implication is that students do not want to pursue Geography as a course in the same line of occupation as their parents; the students do not agree that their father want them to study Geography as he did and they also do not agree that their parents' love for Geography is encouraging enough for them to want to study it as a course in the higher institution. Items 8 and 9 are negative items and the mean scores of 1.45 and 1.68 respectively show favourable perception. The implication is that the findings show that majority of students who study Geography as a course in higher institution do so majorly as a result of their parents' low level of income which may not enable them afford to pursue a career in courses like medicine and engineering and also, the finding shows that the students agreed that students from large sized families often are left with no choice but to pursue less expensive courses like geography.

Research Question Three: How does gender influence the perception of students in the choice of Geography as a course of study at higher institutions?

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation ratings of Gender and Students' Perception of Geography as a Course of Study

S/N	Item	<i>Students' perception of Geography</i>		
		Mean	SD	Decision
11	Geography is a feminine subject	1.95	0.86	Unfavourable perception
12	Geography suits males better because of the fieldworks involved	2.92	0.76	Unfavourable perception
13	More males than females offer Geography as a subject in my school	2.84	0.78	Unfavourable perception
14	My Geography teacher is a male	2.51	0.71	Unfavourable perception

Table 3 shows that the mean of each items 12, 13, and 14, is more than 2.50; except for item with a mean score of 1.96. This implies that the respondents agreed that Geography as a course suits males more than the female, owing to the field work involved. More males than females offer Geography as a course in the university while majority agreed that their Geography teacher is male. However, majority of the respondents disagreed that Geography is a feminine course. This implies that gender significantly influences the perception of students in their choice of Geography as a course of study in tertiary institutions.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the perception of secondary school students towards the study of Geography in higher institutions. The variables are gender, home background

Secondary School Students' Perception of Geography

Findings show that students find Geography less useful than other subjects; the subject of Geography is perceived as too difficult and uninteresting. However, the students perceive Geography as a lucrative course but do not perceive Geography as too broad. The findings show that the students do not have an overall positive perception of Geography as a choice of course of study in the higher institution. This finding is in line with the observations of Verma and Deshpande, (2016) and Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences (2007) the perception that students have about Geography is generally not very high.

Home Factors Responsible for Students opting to Study Geography in Higher Institutions

With respect to research question two which sought to know what home factors are responsible for students opting to study Geography in higher institutions, findings show students do not want to pursue Geography as a course in the same line of occupation as their parents; the students do not agree that their father want them to study Geography as he did and they also do not agree that their parents' love for Geography is encouraging enough for them to want to study it as a course in the higher institution. Findings also show that majority of students who study Geography as a course in higher institution do so majorly as a result of their parents' low level of income which may not enable them afford to pursue a career in courses like medicine and engineering and also, the finding shows that the students agreed that students from large sized families often are left with no choice but to pursue less expensive courses like geography. Overall, the findings show that parents' level of income and family size are strong determinants responsible for students opting to study Geography in higher institutions

This finding aligns with that of Onasanya and Omosewo (2010) who found that among the dimensions of home background factors influencing students' perception towards the choice of Mathematics as a course of study in higher institution, parents' level of income and family size significantly influenced respondents' perception of Mathematic as a choice of course of study in higher institution.

Gender Influence on the Perception of Students in the Choice of Geography as a Course of Study in Higher Institutions

Findings show that gender significantly influenced the perception of students in their choice of Geography as a course of study in tertiary institutions.

The finding did not support Onasanya & Omosewo (2010) who found out that perception of pedagogy in the comparison of the male mean scores of experimental and control groups were the same entry level with regard to choice. In addition to this, the studies by Ogunleye (2002) and Nwosu (2001) show that perception of science subjects is not gender specific. Also, the studies by Ogunleye & Babajide (2011); Agommuoh & Nzewi (2003) lend credence to non-significant gender effect in perception of science subjects. In addition, influence of gender on students' perception of social studies has been equally investigated.

However, Agomuoh (2010) found that gender influences students' perception of Earth and Environmental Sciences in favour of the male.

Conclusion

From the findings, it is concluded that the perception students have about Geography as a course of study is generally not very high; home background and gender have significant influence on students' perception of Geography as a course of study in higher institution.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of this study, and their implications, the following recommendations are made.

- i. The school authorities should ensure that regular career talk programmes are organized in their schools to expose the students to career options in geography. Doing this will help to build their interest in the subject and subsequently encourage them to study it in higher institution.
- ii. Curriculum planners should improve the Geography curriculum to include current trends and contemporary practices in geography. This is to make the subject attractive to students.

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