

Exploration of Ethiopian University Student's Lived Experience with Pre-Determined Quota Department Placement: A Case Study of School Psychology Student in Bahir Dar University

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ABSTRACT

Education is not only the issue of curriculum and demand, it is far beyond this. It also involves personal interest, preferences, and other socioeconomic factors. Currently, many Ethiopian youths join public higher educational institutions which are not their first choice, and enroll in a department that is not their first choice. Thus, the present study aimed to show lived experience of one student who joined Bahir Dar University School psychology program without her interest. The study used a phenomenological qualitative research approach specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The data for the purpose of the study gathered through semi-structured interviews. The findings of the present study revealed that quota-based department placement highly affects university student's academic life and their future life. Lived experience of the participant of the present study witnessed that a student who joined Ethiopian universities with the lowest pass mark does not get a chance of joining dreamed department. Due to this, the student: felt regret for missed opportunities of not studying hard for entrance exam; get depressed, become anxious, develop a feeling of inferiority because of the failure experienced in controlling once own fate; fail to properly accomplish academic tasks that lead to low academic achievement; and develop a feeling of uncertainty in planning about life after school.

Keywords: Quota-Based Department Placement, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Introduction

Hindi stated that interest is a key factor that contributes to learning and achievement [1]. That is, being interested in a topic is a mental resource that enhances learning, which then leads to better performance and achievement (p. 43). Similarly, theories of Expectancy-value models of motivation describe that a person actively engage on a task when there is a hope to complete a task effectively and when they assume that the task is imperative to them. Other theories of motivation, such as, achievement goals and interest theories also stated that the curiosity of a person on the task highly influenced by the goal a person set and the expectancy from the task [1]. Accordingly, Self-determination theorists state that when we do an activity based on our interest, we do not expect external stimulation. Individuals get natural

curiosity and pleasure when practicing on the task that they consider as reward for the engagement. Those interest-based activities give the person keenness, investigation, freedom, and concentration in the environment [2]. Ryan and Connell state that according to Self-Determination Theory students exert minimal effort, less interest and divert their attention from achievement and deny obligation for their failure when the external bodies regulate their choice [3]. Students encounter anxiety, do not try to solve distresses, and waste their resources. Whereas when students governed by regulations which consider their interest, they work hard to solve their challenges and enjoy school related activities. Guan, Ma, Liu, Yu & Jie argue that when there is a match between interest and department selection, students' level of satisfaction with their department increases and it positively affects their academic performance [4]. From these theoretical assumptions we can infer that the interest of a person has an impact on task performance, in our case over whole life of the student.

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Factors that Influence University Students Department Selection Students may study a major they want to study or they may join a department without their interest because of different factors. Spokane call the match between one's own interest and conditions as "congruence." Guan and associates contextualize the definition of Spokane (definition of congruence) as a match between interest and college major choice [4]. According to Al-Rfou, department selection is one of important life event of a person [5]. Students select the department they want to join because of different reasons. According to the finding of Al-Rfou, the major reasons students consider while selecting their major are: the expected income, alternatives at job, employment status and type of the work. Type of the work could be the value given by the society and culture of the community.

Ethiopian University Students Department Placement

In Ethiopia due to shortages related to budget, trained man power, facilities, and other challenges; it is impossible to accept and assign all students based on their first choice on departments [6]. Especially, since 1990 Ethiopian university student's department placement determined by human resource demand as government and other stakeholders set for departments [7]. This statement shows that there are sub sectors that need priority in terms of recruiting university graduates. According to Mulu, students enter governmental higher institutions without any pre-request after completing preparatory schools based on merged score, they got from University Entrance Exam [8]. This study described that the admission and placement of Ethiopian university students centrally controlled by three Institutions Addis Ababa University, National Agency for Examinations (NAE) and the Ministry of Education. The number of students, competency required, willingness and quality of students registered for a programme decided by these three institutions. Tadesse, stated that students placed into different departments on competitive basis [6]. But students got freedom to join their first-choice department when the number of students which select the department is less than or equal to the quota set for that specific department. When the number of students who select the department exceeds the quota set for the department students will be placed based on their second, third, etc choice.

Impact of Predetermined Quota Department Placement on Students

Study conducted by Mulu, supports the theoretical assumption that students' placement based on interest have impact on academic achievement [8]. This study showed that attrition rate is high with students who join University with low university entrance exam and placed on department without their interest, which is indicator of low academic achievement. For this Mulu took the case of College of Education and Faculty of Sciences in Jigjiga University, Mekelle University and Addis Ababa University, where majority of students assigned without interest and high attrition rate observed in comparison to other colleges and faculties [8].

In general, after student's complete high school they consider different alternatives before deciding the department they want to join. Similarly, even though, different psychological theories elaborate that interest-based education made academic life of students' successful majority of Ethiopian students do not enroll in the department of their interest. In Ethiopia students placed

in different departments based on competitive basis considering available resources and demand of different stakeholders. Thus, the present study aimed to explore lived experience of student with quota-based department placement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of students with predetermined quota department placement and its impact on academic achievement in Bahir Dar University: Third Year School Psychology Students in Focus. At this stage in the research, the experience of student who joined field of study which is not her first choice discovered. Ethiopian students after completing high schools, placed on different universities based on competitive basis and universities intake capacity. In recent years the number of higher educational institutions are rising significantly in Ethiopia. Consequentially the number of students joining universities are increasing drastically; however, only the interest of academically high performing students takes consideration for department placement. Factors such as trained man power, budget and facilities may determine the number of students who join specific department in advance, that can label as quota-based department placement. Hence, most of the time low performing students do not join department of their first choice. This mismatch of interest and placement made students to lose motivation, passion, and effort for hard work. Thus, this study aimed to discover lived experience of student's with quota-based department placement.

Beside this, majority of my campus friends who got degree by attending at department which was not their first choice did not study well and now majority of them are not working with it. Some of them go back to school to study other discipline in private colleges/universities or by extension programme in government universities. Others are working on non-professional arenas and still there are some others who are unemployed. Even those who are working by their profession told me that they are not happy with life, they are dealing with things that do not concern them personally. These and other related experiences initiated me to study about mismatch of interest and department placement and its impact on the life of students'.

Major Research Questions

In a bid to fully understand the experience of Bahir Dar University third year school psychology programme students, the present study tried to address the following major research questions:

1. What is the lived experience of a student with predetermined quota department placement?
2. What is the impact of predetermined quota department placement ?

Research Procedure

This study aimed to explore the experience of student with predetermined quota department placement in Bahir Dar University: Third Year School Psychology Students in Focus. To this end, the study used phenomenological qualitative research approach specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

According to Willing, "Phenomenology is concerned with the phenomena that appear in our consciousness as we engage with

the world around us” (p. 52) [9]. Tuffour, argue that IPA is helpful to examine comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of small number participants in addition to its emphasis on convergence and divergence of experiences [10]. Based on these characteristics I found IPA more convenient method to study the phenomenon of predetermined quota department placement focusing on school psychology student in Bahir Dar University.

The primary concern of IPA researchers is to elicit rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena under investigation. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews are the most popular method to achieve that, although other alternatives of data collection like diaries, focus groups, letters, or chat dialogues can be used [11]. For this study I prefer using semi-structured interview, as it allowed me and the participant to engage in real time dialogue. The use of semi-structured interview also gave me enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which helped me to investigate in more detail with further questions. Willing stated that, IPA involves semi-structured interviews transcription, because the researcher expected to be immersed in the real-life situation of participants of the study [9]. Consequently, open ended and non-directive interview questions used in this study to give the participant opportunity to share her personal experience without restriction about the phenomenon of study.

The analysis of the study used the interpretation of participant’s experience. The interpretation structured around master themes and then each theme introduced and discussed with its’ various implications. Quotations from the participant used to make the interpretation of findings sounder and to show comments and interpretations explicitly.

Findings of the Study

This interpretive phenomenological analysis used single case study to explore experience of student with pre-determined quota department placement. The data collected through semi-structured interview narrated under five themes and interpreted using psychological concepts and theories to illuminate the understanding of the research problem.

The Incidence of Meeting with the Case Participant

At the middle of February 2018, it was the time Bahir Dar University students have been rushing to complete their assignments and preparing themselves to take first semester final exam, I went to psychology department head office to ask her as to give me the contact of third year school psychology students’ representative as to help me in selecting a sample for the study. She was busy talking with one professor and writing something on her laptop. I began waiting her outside the office. There were some students standing in front of the office, they are talking about grade changes. From the conversation between those students the conversation between two female students grip my attention. From the conversation between these two girls I understand that they are school psychology students. The statement which grasped my attention was; one of the two girls said “either we do not join good department or we do not have good grade, what a hell life we are living?” The girl which stands with this girl did not say anything. The first girl continued her grumbling and said “what can I do now?” At this moment the other girl began talking, she said “do not worry God knows for

us.” Their dialogue seems they have something to fix with the department head, I did not understand the issue which worried them. In between they have been talking about their friends and sometimes they keep quiet. The professor and the department head were still talking inside the office. I have been getting tired because I stood in-front of the office for about 20 to 25 minutes.

Then one thing came to my mind: why not I talk to these students? Yeah, they were convenient participants for my study, they joined school psychology department without their interest. I began talking with them and I told them the reason why I am there and my need to interview graduating class school psychology student/s who joined the department without interest. Then I asked them if they are volunteer for the interview. The one who have been talking earlier did not responded to me, rather she looked at me with surmise. However, the girl who was not talking replied and said “yes, it is possible.” And I gave her an appointment for Monday afternoon. The one who was talking earlier told me she is busy and refused to come for the interview; perhaps because she was not in a good mood. I told her to come if she can. Monday afternoon I met Selam (pseudonym) for the interview (the volunteer girl).

I interviewed Selam two times; the first interview held by face to face communication and for the second time I used cellphone. I made the second interview (cellphone interview) because while I began transcribing the first interview, I found some unclear ideas.

School Life before University and Family Attachment

Selam is third year school psychology student in Bahir Dar University. She is 21 years old. She was born in small town in Tigray Regional State to merchant families. My interview began by asking her about her school life before joining university and her expectations. Selam said “I was academically medium achieving student at high school level”, she scored 3.00 at grade 10 national exam. She said “my parents communicated with me loosely about education until I got pass mark to attend preparatory school.” The experience of Selam shows that, she did not get adequate follow up and guidance from her parents rather they let her to do things by herself.

In Ethiopia students select science or social science stream upon completion students sit for the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate (ESLC). She said that “my parents began talking with me about my plan after they notice I scored pass mark for joining preparatory school and they advised me to join natural science stream and study technical field at university”, but she refused their choice and she selected social science stream. She said that “they did not listen to me and they simply told me what to study, they did not know my interest to become banker”. Alba et al. explained that some parents think that what they suggest to their children in what course to pursue is better, yet they tend to ignore what their children desire [12]. Selam started her preparatory school as social science student with a dream of becoming banker. Her parents were not aware of her potential and her needs, because of their weak follow up in her academic life.

Department Placement and Emotional Reactions

The Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Examination (EHEEE) is what students take at the end of grade 12 to join

higher education. In this regard, Selam did not prepare herself sufficiently for EHEEE and she scored 324 at the entrance exam out of 700 and she joined university by scoring point which was approximately minimum requirement to join university in 2015/2016 academic year. She regrets when she recalls her time at preparatory class,

I attended grade 11 and 12 carelessly, but I do not know why I was careless. That was my big mistake.

...while I was in grade 11 and 12, I spent most of my time chatting with friends, I was not aware of the consequences of scoring low entrance score.

... I began feeling sad since I heard my placement to Bahir Dar University under other social science stream by Ministry of Education, while my choice was Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE).

This paragraph shows that, Selam believe that though she has potential of scoring good mark at entrance exam she missed the chance because of not study hard. Consequently, she felt regret for underutilizing her potential.

Selam said “I was interested to study accounting because it is very good field, it has good job opportunities, accountants earn good salary, people respect accountants and cities have enormous places for accountants”. She was eager to join accounting department because of her exaggerated expectation with the field. But, success in academic life requires fulfilling academic requirements. In Ethiopia students’ placement to different departments in higher institutions is on a competitive basis [7]. Since the placement process does not solely depend on the interest (choice) of students, Selam failed to join accounting department because she scored almost the pass mark only. After coming to Bahir Dar University again there was selection of faculty then department. Students who placed to Bahir Dar University under other social science stream by Ministry of Education have three faculty options, she selected Faculty of Education and Behavioral Science from the three alternatives and the faculty accepted her. Again, there were five departments under Faculty of Education and Behavioral Science.

Selam said “I was worried about which department to select because I was eager to join a department which has good salary, good job and well known by people and I consulted senior students about the departments to select the best among the alternatives I had”. She consulted her seniors because she had an assumption that they have advanced experience and knowledge. The senior students advised her to select adult education and community development or general psychology. Based on her seniors’ advice from the five departments under Faculty of Education and Behavioral Science,

I selected adult education and community development on the first order, general psychology on second order, and so on, but the university placed me based on my fourth choice to school psychology programme. Before application format given to me to select from the five departments found under the Faculty of Education and Behavioral Science I did not know about the department. My seniors told me school psychologists can work only at schools or woreda level education offices with subsidiary salary.

What Selam heard from the senior students about the programme was not good. When senior students told her about the programme they understate it. She explains her feeling of the moment she knew about her department placement:

I got depressed and I tried to change it to another department but it was impossible. I called my parents to tell them I am coming back to home and study other department in private college. But my families refused to accept this idea because they did not want to pay for me tuition fee at private college. I felt helpless, I went to church and cry blaming my fate.

In this passage Selam shows her desire to change the department or get financial support from her parents to pursue another degree. Her inability to change the department and her families’ refusal upset her. According to Gray, when people believe that they have little or no control over their fate they get depressed and become anxious [13]. Even though Selam were contemplating to leave the campus it was impossible, hence she began attending the programme. According to Feldman, when peoples face an intolerable situation that they could not resolve they simply gave up and accept things the way they were [14].

Selam as School Psychology Student

Selam explains her stay in the university for the past five semesters and her current condition as a graduating class:

Beginning from freshman until now I am not happy, I am here because I do not have place to go. I felt irritated about bad thing happed on me especially when class activities, assignments and exams made me busy, sometimes I say to myself ‘I joined this department without my interest again why teachers give me such boring and difficult tasks’. I read a lot but I understand few of the concepts, because I cannot concentrate, I think about my lost opportunities.

Selam considers her placement to school psychology programme as bad fate because of the factors she mentioned earlier. She was unstable and she did not properly accomplish tasks given to her by her instructors, because of this she did not have good GPA. Guan et al., argue that when there is a match between interest and department selection, students’ level of satisfaction with their department increases and it positively affects their academic performance [4]. Selam was not volunteer to tell me her exact GPA at the university. She roughly said to me “it is not good”. She attributes it to her lack of interest to the placement process. She is anxious and she did not fully utilize her potential to score good mark in the department she enrolled.

Even as graduating class student, Selam is not comfortable with her department and she felt as she is inferior because of her failure to join the department she has been dreaming. She needs to boost her public image but she does not, because of her negative perception; she perceives that she is dealing with a profession which peoples have little knowledge about and accept it as reserved for low academic achievers. Roccas argued that when an individual accepted into a certain type of highly selective school, their self-esteem can increase and he or she will identify with it more strongly [15]. Selam said that:

I never tell anybody I am school psychology student, only my classmates, my friends and my families know it. I do not tell for stranger I am school psychology student, I do not need others know I am school psychology student. Sometimes people accidentally know my department and they ask me why I selected this department. I feel as I am inferior and feel ashamed, because I feel I am studying a field people do not know much about it.

Future plan

I asked Selam her future plan; in her response,

If my families will cover tuition fee for my second degree in accounting I do not want to work by this degree, because the salary of school psychologists is not attractive, if not I may struggle until I find job as school counselor or any kind of office work. Do you know? ...my seniors are at their families' home without any job because there are only few vacancies for school psychologists, again I do not have good GPA.

Selam is uncertain about her future and she does not talk about her plan confidently. She only wants to work as school psychologist/expert if her families do not cover for her tuition fee for her second degree; on the other hand she does not have confidence about getting a job because she does not have good GPA and there are few vacancies for school psychologists.

Expected Differences

I asked Selam the different thing that will happen if she were studying the field of her interest. After long pause she responded,

If I were studying accounting, I will be happy because it is my childhood dream. I will have strong commitment to study, I will not bother about job after graduation, I will score good grade and, I may talk proudly about my department.

This paragraph shows, Selam believes that she will be successful if she were studying the department of her choice. Selam also perceives as she will be capable of leading joyful life, taking responsibilities, boosting herself in the public, perform good academically and her future will be bright, if she were studying field of her interest.

Finally, I asked Selam if she has something to add about quota-based department placement. She said that, I think there should be record of what students need to become beginning from elementary grade level until they join university or somewhere else and they should support based on their interest and talent. Anecdotes of students must support the university placement rather than simply sticking on entrance exam and teachers at lower grade level should have trained on skills of treating students based on their talent and keeping records of students.

In this paragraph Selam underscores the importance of anecdotal in placing students into different departments at higher institution rather than solely relying on entrance exam results. Her experience also gives clue about importance of supporting and guiding students based on their inclination beginning from elementary grade level.

Discussion and Conclusion

The lived experience of Selam shows that; family follow up and guidance is important in the life of youths begging from earlier ages. Her experience is congruent with the suggestion of Seashore, proper family guidance is crucial in success of youths' life [16]. The follow up of Selam's family in her academic life resulted refusal of Selam to listen her families' suggestion to select natural science stream. Again, her families failed to understand her and provide for her important guidance and support after she joined preparatory school and thereafter.

The incongruence between interest and department placement caused emotional disturbance on Selam. This aspect of the experience of Selam matches with Feldman description of regret and sadness; failure to resolve difficulties results in regret over what might achieve but was not and sadness comes from experiencing disappointments in life [14]. Selam regrets for underutilizing her potential while she was preparatory student and she felt sad because she failed to join department she selected and because her families refuse to support her.

The experience of Selam also illustrates that students think about alternative job opportunities, economic returns, social recognition, and locations while selecting department; which is supportive of Al-Rfou finding, students consider income after graduation, alternatives at job, employment status and type of the work during major selection [5].

Ryan and Connell state that according to Self-Determination Theory students exert minimal effort, less interest and divert their attention from achievement and deny obligation for their failure when the external bodies regulate their choice [3]. The experience of Selam supports this theoretical assumption, the mismatch between her interest and the department placement made her reluctant to accomplish tasks properly and to take responsibilities, consequently she did not score good GPA at the university for the past five semesters.

From the experience of Selam we can infer that the match between interest and department placement result for positive emotion. She thinks that there will be different things happen on her life if she assigned on department of her choice. She assumes that; she will be happy, committed, optimist and confident if she was studying the major she selected. Achievement goals and interest theories are congruent with the experience of Selam; they stated that the curiosity of a person on the task may influenced by the goal a person set and the expectancy from the task [1].

Tracking the record of students prior to department placement in higher institutions contributes for better match between the interest of students and department placement. Selam argues against fully relying on entrance exam for department placement and she thinks use of record of students (anecdotal) is crucial. The writing of Mohd Amin et al. is congruent with the idea of Selam [17]. They recommend considering knowledge and interest of students in selecting students into institutions of higher learning rather than solely depending on pre-university CGPAs, since each person has its own life goal.

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