

Personal Agency and Career Development of Adolescent Learners



Angu Roland Nji

Lecturer, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon.

Corresponding Author's Email:

n_rolux@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Aim: Personal agency has to do with learners' capacity to reflect, set goals, act with intentions, forethought, self-regulate, and acting responsibly to effect change. In this light, this study sets out to investigate personal agency and career development of adolescent learners. The research question was what is the effect of self-regulation in the career development of adolescent learners.

Methods: The study was anchored on three core theories which are: Bruner's (1985) Spiral Curriculum, Vygotsky's (1978) Theory of Sociocultural Development and Super's (1990) developmental theory of self-concept. The concurrent mixed method research design was used in conducting this study. Three hundred (300) adolescent students were purposively selected from five secondary schools in the Bamenda Municipality of the North West Region of Cameroon. These schools are Government Bilingual High School Bayelle, Government Bilingual High School Atiela, Government Bilingual High School Bamenda, Saint Paul's College Nkwen and Christ The King Secondary School. A structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

Results: Looking at the results from the regression analysis, the R-Square for the overall model is 0.606 with an adjusted R of 0.605. This suggests that 60.6% of the variations in students' career choices can be accounted for by self-regulation. It further shows that $F(458.482)$ with $p=0.000$. This suggests that there is a significant effect of self-regulation on students' career choice. Consequently, H_0 is rejected and H_a accepted.

Conclusion: Self-regulation has a significant positive effect on students' career choice.

Recommendation: The government should enact policies that will enable training of teachers and enable them teach self-regulated learning skills to learners, and provide learning environments that give learners the latitude to act, take responsibility and actively direct the desired learning outcome for themselves.

Keywords: *Personal agency, self-regulation, career development, adolescent learners.*

INTRODUCTION

Bandura (2006) posits that personal agency has to do with learners' capacity to reflect, set goals, act with intentions, forethought, self-regulate, and taking responsibility to effect change. In the 21st century, learners are expected to be active, engaged, responsible, to take and ownership of their own learning. As at 2024, classrooms (especially in the Bamenda Municipality of the North West Region of Cameroon) have experienced a paradigm shift whereby focus is not on the teacher but on the learners. It is more about what our learners can do than what teachers can teach. In this regard, Tchombe (2019) draws attention to the fact that the teaching and learning transaction should be anchored on needs-interest –driven. In such a context the need for the learners to learn, be engaged, employ multiplicity of learning strategies, be intrinsically motivated, set goals, have self-efficacy belief in their ability to learn and self-regulate become paramount. The teaching and learning transaction should be focused on learnability rather than teachability. In such a context, students can hone personal agency skills like learning how to learn, manage their emotions, develop learning strategies, set goals, plan and monitor their learning. Reese (2017) adds that students with personal agency skills develop the capacity to play an active role in their own learning rather than being passive in the teaching-learning transaction.

Gallagher and Trigg (2016) believe that personal agency gives learners the latitude to intentionally make things happen. Such personal agency skills enable learners to actively engage in their development, to adapt with the changing times and to make positive use of the resources at their disposal to effect desired outcome. Moreover, learners equipped with personal agency skills can plan, monitor, evaluate, and regulate their learning. They can set short- and long-term goals and to follow up by self-monitoring and evaluation to ensure that such goals are achieved for them to attain desirable learning outcomes. It becomes imperative for learners to be given the opportunity and ability to develop capacities to make meaningful choices about their learning given that such immediate choices about what to study, where to study, how to study, and why study, will eventually translate to a career trajectory whereby they will eventually settle on a career. When learners are guided to develop the necessary personal agency capacities, they set the tone for lifelong, self-directed learning within a context whereby learning is ongoing and learners keep on honing and refining these skills. In this regard, learners can take responsibility, make responsible decisions about their learning and career goals, take initiative and further develop their cognitive capacities.

Statement of the Problem

Adolescent learners in Cameroon experience a stage of development whereby they are constantly searching for an identity. They frequently identify with multiple career, social, political and religious identities. Unfortunately,00, they are never certain as to their career prospects or trajectories given that they are constantly being bombarded by conflicting information from peers, parents, teachers, counsellors and their personal role models many of whom they encounter in the virtual rather than the real world. Adolescents are at the developmental stage whereby Super (1990) believes they no longer fantasize about a career but they are gradually testing their personal preferences, opportunities, interests and capabilities in school and in the world of internship and apprenticeship. Unfortunately, as noted by Erikson, adolescent stage of development is where they search for an identity, such as career identity. They often explore different career options as they figure out what fits them best. Personal agency skills, most specifically self-regulation skills, is

one of those capacities that if well-developed could give adolescents the latitude to be able to set goals, plan their career, monitor and evaluate their learning process which is one developmental pathway towards their eventual career. It has been observed by this researcher that most adolescent learners in classrooms in the Bamenda Municipality are seldom exposed to self-regulated learning skills. At the same time, most of them have difficulties planning their learning, monitoring, as well as evaluating their own learning. Unfortunately, these are skills that can be developed through teaching but most adolescents have never been taught these skills. This explains why many of them end up confused about a career path for life. It was against this backdrop that this study sought to investigate personal agency and career development of adolescent learners. In this regard, the study sought to provide answer to one research question which is: what is the effect of self-regulation in the career development of adolescent learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal agency is closely linked to metacognition as both give the learners the capacity to act, set goals, monitor and self-regulate their learning. In this regard, Flavell (1976) saw metacognition as a person's knowledge about his/her cognitive processes that enables him/her to learn and understand. As such, metacognition should not only focus on the strategies that students use but students' knowledge of when and how to use them. Griffith and Ruan (2005) posit that metacognition gives the individual the latitude to show an awareness and regulation of his/her mental processes. In the views of Bandura (2006), personal agency does not simply revolve around knowledge to act or having the capacity to act but it has to do with acting to effect change. Klemenčič (2015) believes that people with personal agency can be more self-reflective in nature, are able to act intentionally, engage and interact with their environment and can make informed decisions about their own learning. Personal agency is not a given or a stable characteristic that individuals possess. Just like intelligence, these are skills that can be learned and improved upon with time. Teachers are therefore called upon to play an active role to ensure that these skills are taught for the benefit of learners so that they can be lifelong, self-regulated learners. Gallagher (2000) posits that personal agency is a sense that the individual is there and ready to take action that will enable him effect change in his own outcome. When students have passion toward a field of study, they will try to build up learning strategies and develop a conducive learning environment to study. A person with a sense of personal agency perceives himself/herself as the subject influencing his/her own actions and life. This is because he/she has the power to plan about his work, set goals on how he/she want the work to be accomplished, monitor the progress of the work and evaluate the extend of the success of the work.

Self-regulation which is an important component of personal agency refers to how individuals can influence, control or modify their behaviour, thinking and feelings to align with set goals and standards (Freund & Hennecke, 2015). In this regard, cognizance must be taken that goals are important in self-regulated learners as their ability to set goals and follow it up give them the latitude to direct and guide their behaviour and cognitive processes, as well as help them organize and structure perception, thought, and behavior into meaningful action. Diefendorff and Seaton (2015) maintain that by choosing or accepting a goal, students motivate themselves intrinsically. As a result, they are inclined to accept and perform given tasks without hesitation. Thus, selecting a goal can be a conscious and unconscious process that takes cognizance of how dynamic people are, as well as long- and short-term motives.

Schunk and Zimmerman (2007) are not too far-fetched in their definition of self-regulation as they term it as learners' ability to regulate their thinking, feelings, emotions and actions for desired learning outcomes. Looking at it from learners' engagement Tchombe (2019) draws our attention to the idea that learners are increasingly being called upon to take ownership and control of their learning and be engaged in a give and take relationship. At the same time, Bruner (1985) posits that learners should be exposed to classroom experiences that permit them go beyond the information given. From these perspectives, self-regulated learning can thus be seen as an active, constructive process that give learners the freedom to set their own learning goals, to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Panadero (2017) opines that for students to be successful as self-regulated learners, the following steps must be taken: first is that they should be able to set their own short- and long-term learning goals; secondly, there is need for learners to constantly monitor their learning to make sure that planned activities are effected; third, learners must be able to exercise control not only of their cognitive processes but their emotions as well. Finally, these learners must be able to engage in self-reflection.

This study is anchored on three relevant theories which are based on the views of Bruner (1985), Vygotsky (1978) and Super's (1990) Developmental theory of Self-concept. Jerome Bruner (1985), sees the interaction that learners have with others as very necessary. According to Bruner, it is vital to provide the necessary support to learners' self-conscious participation and intelligent self-regulation. Bruner's spiral curriculum gives the learners the freedom to move from one level of understanding to the next, making sure that simple concepts are taught before moving to more complex concepts. For Bruner, it is imperative that learners master simple skills because this will be a necessary condition to acquire and gain more complex skills. In this regard, teachers are called upon to provide challenging but meaningful and context relevant activities for learners to be able to go beyond the given.

Vygotsky's Socio-cultural Theory of learning maintains that learners learn through social interaction with more capable peers or in the milieu of others who are capable of helping them get beyond their zone of proximal development. This is facilitated by the more capable other (could be a teacher, a parent, or a peer) scaffolding knowledge for the less capable learners to follow. In this regard, Durkin (1993, p.370) states that "The whole process of fostering development relates to the zone of proximal development as it reflects both the individual's own capacities and the structures made available through participation with others in a particular social environment". In this light, it is glaring that the participatory approach to teaching as championed by Vygotsky focuses on learnability rather than teachability as it engages students in cognitive processes and action. Thus, it is imperative for teachers to understand the cognitive processes in teaching which enables learners to acquire meaningful knowledge. When learners engage in debates, classroom discussion, organization, construction of images, group work with others, the more knowledgeable learners help in scaffolding learning for those with lower ability levels.

Super's Developmental theory of self-concept (1990) is anchored on the premise that one important criterion in planning a career for students and especially adolescents is developing a sense of who they are and also coming to terms with the idea that change is important and ongoing. Super's idea is that self-concept evolves over time. This is important because, during adolescence, individuals are searching for their identity. Adolescents often try out different identities—social, academic, career-related, political, and religious—because they are still figuring out who they are. It is quite glaring that during secondary and high school, as well as University, adolescents are

often exposed to experiences that give them the freedom to try out their skills when they do go for internship. When exposed to such experiences they further build their career identity and self-concept by learning and honing skills that are required to fit in a particular career. In Super's views, occupational preferences of young people are prone to change with time and experience. In their developmental experience, adolescents frequently seek, obtain and process information about themselves, occupational and educational alternatives, as well as life styles and role options.

METHODOLOGY

The concurrent mixed method research design was used in conducting this study. In this light, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and used with equal emphasis. With this design there is complementarity whereby the strengths of one method complement for the weaknesses of the other. This design further provided triangulation permitting the researcher to cross-verify results from both methods, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the research findings. Quantitatively, structured questionnaires were designed for adolescent students to test their self-regulatory learning skills and career development. This gave the researcher the latitude to gather objective and numerical data on the phenomenon under study. Qualitatively, using semi structured interviews, the researcher was able to get the in-depth and subjective views of the respondents on the phenomenon of self-regulated learning and career development. This qualitative phase of the work permitted the use of content thematic analysis whereby the researcher was able to generate core themes that emerged from the interviews. This qualitative phase enabled the researcher to uncover contradictions or new perspectives that quantitative data could not.

The researcher purposively selected three hundred (300) adolescent students from five secondary schools in the Bamenda Municipality of the North West Region of Cameroon. These schools are Government Bilingual High School Bayelle, Government Bilingual High School Atiela, Government Bilingual High School Bamenda, Saint Paul's College Nkwen and Christ The King Secondary School. A closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with 30 students who were randomly selected through a simple random sampling technique.

RESULTS

Data for this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation helped in providing answers to the research question. To analyze quantitative data, multiple linear regression analysis, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and coefficient tables were used to test the hypotheses of the study. Qualitatively, thematic content analysis was employed to analyze the semi-structured interview guide.

Table 1:

Self-regulation and Students' Career Choice

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Stdev	Ranking
I can effectively direct my thoughts, understand my feelings and control my actions	179(59.7%)	85(28.3%)	27 (9%)	8 (2.7%)	2.74	0.64	9
I always try to monitor, evaluate and control my level of progress in learning	164(54.7%)	122(40.7%)	14 (4.6%)	(0%)	3.00	0.64	7
I always think about particular learning strategies by asking myself questions as I read that I will use in reaching my goals.	113(37.7%)	167(55%)	18(6%)	2(0.6%)	3.24	0.45	4
I always set a time management plan when studying	98(32.7%)	152(50%)	44(14.6%)	6 (.06%)	3.44	0.51	2
I do rehearsals, elaborate on concepts and summarize content in my own words to ease understanding	176(58.7%)	87(29%)	37 (12.3%)	(0%)	3.29	0.59	3
I seek for help to develop my own skills and improve understanding from the school counsellor or teachers	99(33%)	149(49.7%)	43(14.3%)	9(3%)	3.15	1.15	6
Sometimes, I sit alone and meditate over my work or go to the library to study.	102(34%)	175(58.3%)	23(7.7%)	(0%)	2.86	0.90	8

I try as much as possible to postpone enjoyable activities in order to make progress towards my goals.	105 (35%)	137(45.7%)	42(17.3%)	6(2%)	3.20	0.88	5
I keep track of how far I have gone with my study	146(48.7%)	99(33%)	55(18.3%)	(0%)	3.38	0.50	1
Total average	131.3(0.4%)	130.3(0.4%)	33.6(0.1%)	3.4(0.01%)	3.0		

Table 1 shows that 59.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they can effectively direct their thoughts, understand their feelings and control their actions, 28.3% agreed, 9% disagreed while 2.7% strongly disagreed with the idea with a mean of 2.74 and the standard deviation of 0.64. A mean of 2.74 shows that majority of the respondents agreed that they can effectively direct their thoughts, understand their feelings and control their actions. Also, 54.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they always try to monitor, evaluate and control their level of progress in learning, 40.7% agreed, 4.6% disagreed while 0% strongly disagreed giving a mean of 3.00 and the standard deviation of 0.64. Similarly, a mean of 3.0 shows that that they always try to monitor, evaluate and control their level of progress in learning. Furthermore, 37.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they always think about learning strategies by asking themselves questions as they read so as to reach their goals, 55% agreed, 6% disagreed, 0.6% strongly disagreed with a mean of 3.24 and the standard deviation of 0.45. A mean of 3.24, therefore, shows that they always think about learning strategies by asking themselves questions as they read so as to reach their goals.

Looking at the next item, 32.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they always set a time management plan when studying, 50% agreed, and 14.6% disagreed while 0.6% strongly disagreed with a mean of 3.44 and the standard deviation of 0.51. A mean of 3.44 shows that they always set a time management plan when studying. To proceed, 58.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they do rehearsals, elaborate on concepts and summarize contents in their own words to ease understanding, 29% agreed, 12.3% disagreed while 0% strongly disagreed with a mean of 3.29 and the standard deviation of 0.59. A mean of 3.29 highlights the fact that they do rehearsals, elaborate on concepts and summarize contents in their own words to ease understanding. Moreover, 33% of the respondents strongly agreed that they seek for help to develop their own skills and improve understanding from the school counsellor or teachers, 49.7% agreed, 14.3% disagreed while 3% strongly disagreed giving a mean of 3.15 and the standard deviation of 1.15. In the same vein, a mean of 3.15 shows that they seek for help to develop their own skills and improve understanding from the school counsellor or teachers.

Looking at the next item, 34% of the respondents strongly agreed that sometimes, they sit alone and meditate over their work or go to the library to study, 58.3% agreed, 7.7% disagreed while 0% strongly disagreed giving a mean of 2.86 and the standard deviation of 0.90. A mean of 2.86 shows that they sit alone and meditate over their work or go to the library to study. To proceed, 35% of the respondents strongly agreed that they try as much as possible to postpone enjoyable activities

to make progress towards their goals, 45.7% agreed, 17.3% disagreed while only 2% strongly disagreed giving a mean of 3.20 and the standard deviation of 0.88. A mean of 3.20 shows that they try as much as possible to postpone enjoyable activities to make progress towards their goals. Looking at the last item, it is glaring that 48.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that they keep track of how far they have gone with their study, 33% agreed, 18.3% disagreed while 0% strongly disagreed giving a mean of 3.38 and the standard deviation of 0.50. This mean of 3.38 shows that the respondents keep track of how far they have gone with their study

Hypothesis Testing

H₀: Self-regulation does not significantly influence students' career choice.

Table 2:

Regression Model Summary for Self-Regulation and Students' Career Choice

Presentation of Inferential Statistics

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.779 ^a	.606	.605	.16982

Table 2 shows that the R-Square for the overall model is 0.606 with an adjusted R of 0.605. This suggests that 60.6% of the variations in students' career choices can be accounted for by self-regulation.

Table 3:

Regression Coefficient for Self-Regulation and Students' Career Choice

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.763	.118		6.460	.000
	self-regulation and students' career choice	.798	.037	.779	21.412	.000

The regression coefficients table 3 indicates that the regression equation is given by Students' Career Choice = 0.763 + 0.798 x Self-Regulation. Thus, when there is zero self-regulation, students' career choice is 0.763. When self-regulation increases by one unit, students' career choice increases by 0.798. This increase is significant as indicated by the p-value of 0.000.

Table 41:

ANOVA Table of Regression Analysis for Self-regulation and Students' Career

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	13.222	1	13.222	458.482	.000 ^b
	Residual	8.594	298	.029		
	Total	21.817	299			

Table 4 shows that F (458.482) with $p=0.000$. This suggests that there is a significant effect of self-regulation on students' career choice. Consequently, H_0 is rejected and H_a accepted. It can therefore be concluded that self-regulation has a significant positive effect on students' career choice.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

Table 5:

Self-regulation and students' career choice

Questions	Categories	Themes	Code descriptions	Groundings	Quotations
Do you always try to find out why you failed in a particular subject? Explain	Yes	finding out reasons for failure	Self-assessment	Majority	"...I always find out what will cause me not to repeat mistakes again..."
Do you employ study strategies when studying? Explain	Yes	Summarization, rehearsals and construction of images	Sitting position	Majority	"...I do use good sitting posture so that I will not sleep...I also summarize, rehearse and construct images"

Do you postpone enjoyable activities in order to make progress towards your goals? Explain	Yes	Delay of gratification	Postponing enjoyable activities	Majority	“...I do it because I know that those programs will distract me from....” ... I am focus on even though that are good....”
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Table 5 shows that based on trying to find out why they failed in a particular subject, it was categorized as affirmative. The theme was based on always finding out reasons for failure and Self-assessment was the code description. Majority of them grounded the idea meanwhile the quotation says they always find out why they failed and it is because they do not want to repeat mistake again. In addition, when asked to explain if they do use study strategies when studying, the dominant theme that emerged were summarization, rehearsals and construction of images. Finally, when asked if they would postpone enjoyable activities to make progress towards their goals, the dominant theme that emerged was delaying gratification.

DISCUSSION

From the quantitative result, an average mean of 3.0 showed that majority of respondents agreed with the view that self-regulation influences students' career choice. Inferentially, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted, which therefore implies that self-regulation has a significant positive influence on Students' career choice. The content thematic analysis reveal that respondents always find out why they fail, and that they employ multiple strategies of learning like summarization, rehearsals and construction of images. This is consistent with the views of Tchombe (2019) who emphasizes the fact that learners must take ownership and control of their learning as they frequently engage in a give-and-take relationship in the teaching and learning transaction. Also, in synergy with this result is Bruner (1985) who calls on the learners to go beyond the information given by being able to set their own goals and search for information on their own.

This result also aligns with that of García-Pérez et al. (2021) who found that students change their learning strategies depending on different factors, with a noticeable influence. Results also concur with Weinstein et al. (2011) who found that when students are provided with effective and useful tips like summarization, note taking techniques and rehearsals, they improve their academic achievement and performance as they learn how to take control of their learning. However, those with better self-regulatory skills typically learn more with less effort and report higher levels of academic satisfaction, because they have been able to understand their learning environment and are able to monitor or control the progress of their work. The results also agree with Kanwal and Naqvi (2016) who revealed a positive relationship between low self-regulation and career indecisiveness while a negative correlation between age and career decision making and that girls had a high self-regulation as compared to boys. The present findings also align with Bao & Cheryl (2024) who found that individuals who possess self-regulatory ability in decision-making contexts were more likely to choose majors and jobs of good fit, experience satisfaction from their career decisions, and choose careers relevant to their college majors. Tolentino et al. (2018) found that

career adaptability is positively associated with job search self-regulation above and beyond the effects of gender. Moderated mediation analyses revealed that the conditional indirect effect of career adaptability in predicting job search self-regulation via self-monitoring is stronger for students with high as opposed to low levels of academic effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government needs to create policies that train teachers to teach these skills and provide learning environments where students can take responsibility, make decisions, and guide their learning. Teachers need to recognize that 21st-century classrooms should equip students to take charge of their own learning and encourage them to be active partners in the learning process. Teachers should directly teach learners self-regulation learning skills to empower them develop a sense of agency so that they have the capacity to plan, monitor, evaluate and set goals about their learning. Teachers should understand that there is a paradigm shift in our classrooms which requires them to move from the idea of teachability to learnability so that the teaching and learning transaction should center around the learners.

Adolescent learners should understand that developing a sense of agency is an important step towards establishing a successful academic and career identity. Learners should be able to take responsibility for their learning, ask themselves questions when they fail, evaluate, monitor and plan their learning and employ the necessary learning strategies that align with their learning styles. Adolescent learners should also be able to understand the realities as well as the skill sets and abilities required in the world of work. In this regard they should try their skills during internship opportunities to understand the careers that fit with their interest, abilities and capabilities. Parents should accompany their children in their learning and provide the necessary environment and materials for their adolescent children to be successful, independent lifelong learners as well as develop a competent career identity.

CONCLUSION

Adolescence is a time of exploration and risk taking whereby learning how to learn and being independent self-regulated learners can be a huge challenge. However, this study has been able to establish that irrespective of the environment, classrooms in which our adolescent learners find themselves, when they are provided with the right environment, training and motivation, they are able to develop their sense of personal agency and are able to plan, self-regulate, monitor and evaluate their learning. Adolescent learners with self-regulation skills are able to employ good learning strategies for successful academic outcome. They are able to take ownership of their learning as they strive to be constructors of knowledge alongside the teachers. Teachers, parents, government agencies all have the mandate to ensure that our adolescent learners develop in an environment that encourages them to take responsibility for their learning, as well as develop a career identity that is relevant within the context in which they live.

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