

## Role of significant others on high school students subject/career selection: An exploratory study

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of the present study is to explore the factors/significant others that influence the decision making process of high school students concerning their career choice/subject selection and to find out the most suitable time for the implementation of career exploration program in the course of studies. For this purpose semi-structured interviews were done from 120 male and 80 female students (from high school, college and university), their parents (n=80) and teachers (n=100) through convenience sampling and four questions were asked from them. First question was open ended while remaining three had few choices and open response option. The data was collected from Pakistani government schools, colleges and universities. On the collected data thematic analysis was done along with the percentages. Results highlighted the role of parents as the most significant person in students' life who influences their subject selection and this way determines the future career. Next the most recommended time for career counseling services is when students had passed their secondary school exams and just enrolled in high school and is going to choose subjects. On the basis of above findings it is concluded that career counseling should be done at high school stage and parents should be the part of counseling sessions.

**KEYWORDS:** parents, career, high school, family involvement, peers, career decision making.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

In the course of studies, a student moves through school, college and university where he decides to go for particular subjects and careers. Sometimes these career decisions are taken by him but most of the time influenced by others. As such decisions are at high risk of failure therefore experts suggest the guided decision making process. mostly adolescents lack this understanding that how cognitive, psychosocial, and career interest factors function together and predict work and work related success [1], therefore, to make this fit best exploratory study is designed to understand the role of indigenous influential factors and suggest the appropriate time for putting students in any intervention like career exploration services.

Literature suggest that career choice is influenced by multiple factors including personality, interests, self concept, cultural identity, globalization, socialization, role models, social support and available resources [2]. Further researchers added the role of context in which they live, their personal aptitudes, social contacts and educational attainment [3]. similarly factors influencing career choice can either be intrinsic or extrinsic or both as most people are influenced by careers that their parents favor, others follow the careers that their educational choices have opened for them, some choose to follow their passion regardless of how much or little it will make them while others choose the careers that give high income [4]. Students own perceptions of being suitable for particular jobs also has been found to be influenced by a number of factors including ethnic background, year in school, level of achievement, choice of science subjects, attitudes and differences in job characteristics [5].

Family involvement in academics and learning is very important in the adolescent years. Unfortunately, family involvement in education tends to decrease across middle and secondary school, because at one side adolescents demand for more autonomy and on the other side school structure and system do not encourage this involvement. Yet family involvement in

education remains a powerful predictor of various adolescent academic and career outcomes. it is necessary to consider that families play a critical role in helping youth succeed in high school and beyond. A large body of research supports the importance of family involvement in the middle and high school years, and intervention evaluations increasingly demonstrate that family involvement can be strengthened with positive results for youth and their school success. Such results can be achieved when there is a match among youth’s developmental needs, parents’ attitudes and practices, and schools’ expectations and support of family involvement [6].

Related to these literature findings, cognitive behavioral theories explain the phenomena very well. Link with career counseling, these theories highlight the function of cognitive processes through which people monitor their behavior. Krumboltz’s (1983) theory was developed from social learning theory (presented by Bandura in 1977) which explain that people develop work and self related beliefs through two kinds of learning experiences: instrumental and associative. Instrumental learning comes when individuals own achievements are rewarded. Associative learning occurs as individuals observe the behavior of significant others and how they are rewarded and punished [7].

Studies done in the past highlight the pivotal role of significant others and how they influence student’s career and subject choices, some such studies are presented in chronological order.

Finding of the research done adolescents suggests that adolescents’ own aspirations are influenced by their parent’s expectations as parental support and encouragement are important factors that have been found to influence career choice and Children simply want to please their parents by selecting their preferred choices [8].

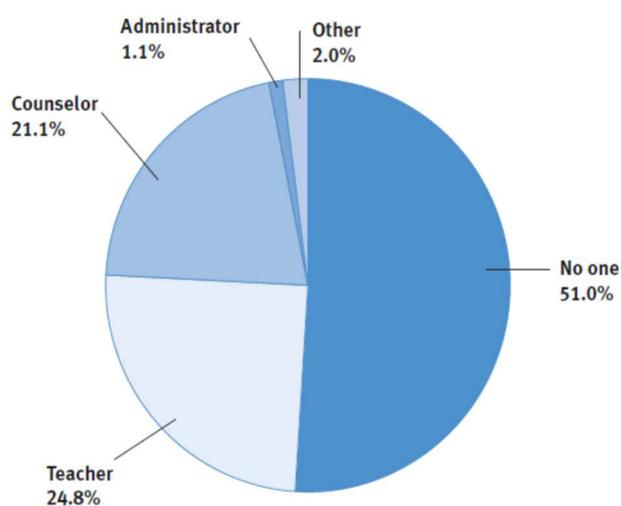
Rather than just family it is found that young adults learn and explore their careers through interaction with the context of family, school and community which eventually lead to their career choice [9].

An Ethiopian study indicated that the students had an external locus of control and believes that there are numerous external factors which influence their career choices which include; political and economic considerations, previous work experience and the role of key individuals in a person’s life [10].

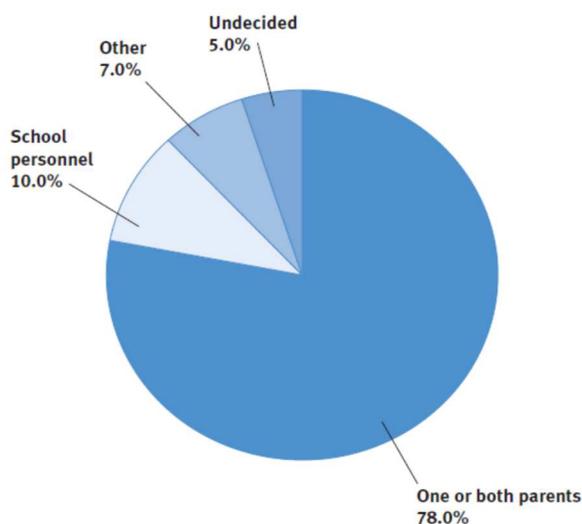
Studies in Kenya show that parents more than teachers play a key role in the career preference of students. Generally, the choice of a career is influenced by parents, friends, and counselors [11].

Pummel, Harwood and Lavallee (2008) reports that a peer has the biggest role as external agent that helps to shape an individual’s career choice.

When literature was explored regarding the particular role of mother and father in the subject/career choice of children then its observed that many studies examined the influences of each parent on the career choices of their sons or daughters separately and have found that mothers tend to have more influence on the career decisions/aspirations of their children than fathers. As authors found that mothers were the most influential and that daughter’ occupational aspirations were often like to their mothers’ selected professions [12]. Similarly, in their study of factors that influence children’s career choices, mothers found as the most influential person adolescents talk to concerning their career choice [13].



**Graph-1; Who in high school has been helpful in advising on career options or options to further your education? (n=809)**



**Graph-2; Who is primarily responsible for helping plan for a career or job? (n=809)**

When surveyed high school students it was found that among school employees, teachers (24.8%) were preferred over counselors as the most likely career influence (see Graph-1). While 20 percent of the students think that their high school had no role in the process of career decision-making. Similarly a high percentage of students (46 percent) identified no one other than their parents or schools who had played a significant role in career counseling (see Graph-2). Regarding parent child interaction on career/ subject related matters, 70 percent stated that they '*spent three hours or less in the past few months discussing careers with their parents*' [14].

Another study was planned to find out factors influencing career choice among secondary school students. Their analysis was based on the following six factors: outcome expectations, gender, personal interests, and other factors [15]. Results of the other study shows that in career decision making outcome expectations play a very influential role in student's final decisions, same results were also reported by other two studies [16], [17]. These similarities confirm that when students make career choice their decisions are much influenced by what a particular career is likely to give in returns.

Peer pressure was also indicated as a factor that influenced career choice of high school students [18]. Students start depending on the advices of peers when overworked teachers do not have time to guide students and simultaneously parents spending less time with their children. Along with the peers, job outcomes were other predictors of career/ subject selection, as results of the one study reported that anticipated earnings are the most influential factors for males while females were mostly influenced by prestigious positions [19]. Similarly another study revealed that females were more influenced in their career choice by the desire to work for other people while males were mostly influenced by monetary gains [20].

Present study was designed with the focus that in Pakistan we need serious attempt to explore career related concerns of students particularly their career goals and who influence on these targets, as Career goals play a critical role in student success by helping students focus their interests. To determine what factors influence young people's choice of careers and career paths, our students perceive a lack of career guidance in their schools, and often cannot name anyone outside of their parents who have been helpful in career counseling. Furthermore, most admit that parental guidance has been limited to a few hours in the past few months. Most young people are receiving little to no career guidance outside the home, and not enough from their parents. Therefore as counselors and educationists it is important to know the factors behind decisions taken by adolescents especially when they are at the point of transition and are going to choose subjects. This understanding will help us to assist students to select right subjects which ultimately lead to satisfied individuals, committed workers and prosperous Pakistan.

As diverse findings were coming in the literature regarding the question that who is most influential in career decision making of high school students then it is decided to explore this question in our indigenous settings along with the most suitable time for the implementation of any career guidance or exploration program. Therefore semi-structured interviews, with its strengths in revealing depth or richness of data regarding human thinking appeared to provide productive and informative method to explore career choice. This research method was chosen to address the research questions of this study and its results will be helpful for teachers, parents as well as educational policy makers to consider the important contribution of significant others and make them conscious to play their proper role in the career decision making process of children.

Based on the above scenario, following objectives were explored;

1. To explore the role of factors/significant others that influence the decision making process of students concerning their career choice/subject selection
2. To find out the most suitable time for the implementation of career exploration program in the course of study

## 2 METHOD

### 2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Based on the philosophy of qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted from students, teachers and their parents in order to get an idea about the role of influential significant figures and suitable time for providing career guidance to the students.

### 2.2 SAMPLE

120 male and 80 female students from high school and onward classes, their teachers (n=100) and one or both of students' parents (n=80; Father-75, Mother-25) were the part of semi-structured interviews. A complete breakdown of the participants' selection information is presented in Table 1. Participants were approached from the cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad-

Pakistan. For data collection purpose high schools, colleges and universities were visited. Convenience sampling was used and informed consent was taken. No incentives were offered. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university. Interviews took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete for each participant.

**Table-1 : Table showing sample distribution**

Students (N= 200)						Teachers (N=100)					
High school (n= 120)		College (n=50)		University (n=30)		High school (n=60)		College (n=22)		University (n=18)	
male	Female	male	female	male	female	Male	female	male	female	male	female
60	60	30	20	10	20	35	25	10	12	11	7

**2.3 INSTRUMENTS**

Separate versions of semi-structured interview guidelines were created for the students, teachers and their parents with the help of expert opinion and through literature review. It is comprised of four questions that were developed in both English and Urdu languages. At the start basic demographic information including gender, class, age etc were asked. It then progressed to more specific career-oriented questions like: At which stage children are at highest need to get career guidance/counseling (e.g. at elementary school, high school or intermediate level or after it)? (See Annex# A, B, C & D).

**2.4 PROCEDURE**

With approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board the author conducted individual interviews with each of the participants. Each interview was in the form of written response which also included demographic data. For the purpose of data collection government schools, colleges and universities were visited. Students and teachers were interviewed by researcher at convenient times and locations while for parents, interview guidelines were given to students to take them home. Special permission was taken from schools, colleges and universities’ administration for data collection. For each interview, informed consent was taken and each participant was approached separately. First demographic information was taken and then other core questions were asked. Whole procedure was completed in 15-20 minutes. No incentive was given to participants. At the end they were thanked for their participation and their anonymity was ensured to them.

**3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The data analysis chosen for this study was qualitative due to the limited amount of information in this area of research especially in Pakistan. The data analysis was performed following the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach on semi-structured interviews. The first stage of analysis involves reading and rereading the transcriptions. During the second stage, the researcher attempts to identify themes that seem to categorize trends seen within the text. In the third stage, the researcher attempts to introduce structure by thinking about the themes in relation to one another. It is likely that some of the themes will form clusters or concepts with share meanings while others may demonstrate hierarchical relationships. These clusters are given labels which capture the essence of the themes. During the fourth stage of analysis the researcher develops a summary table of the themes along with quotations which demonstrate each theme. This table should only include the themes which capture an essence of the participants’ experience of the phenomenon under investigation; therefore, some of the themes generated in stage two were not included. The researcher’s decisions regarding which themes to include are influenced by her interests and focus. The numbers of clusters and themes are entirely dependent on the text and can vary significantly.

The data was then discussed in the results section in three different perspectives: in the students, teachers’ and parent’s perspective. Four questions were asked from each participant. First question was open ended while remaining three had few choices and open response option.

**3.1 QUESTION ONE: CAREER PREFERENCE REASONS**

First question was; why students prefer any career/subject over others? Give reasons. 380 participants responded on this open ended question, in which included students (n=200), parents (n=80) and teachers (n=100). In data analysis five themes emerged which were labeled as role of others, liking, suitability for future, emotional decision making and any other?

*Role of others:* 48% of the students stated that they selected these subjects due to the pressure of someone else mostly parents for instances few respondents stated that “my father like this profession”, “from my parents I used to listen since my childhood that I will join medical profession”, “my father wanted to become army officers now I will become an army officer”. Others highlighted the role of peers, elder brothers or teachers etc as there are many people in a student’s life who can influence their career decisions. Most of the time, parents and friends play a large role, but coaches and teachers can also have a huge impact on a student’s life [21]. While the perception of 29 % teachers and 8 % parents was also the same. As few parents said that “youth of this time do not take dictations but choose careers of their own interests. These findings are the true reflection of our culture where mostly elders particularly parents take decisions and also already collected literature support these results. Young people who feel very "close" to their parents may opt for careers to satisfy their parents rather than themselves. On the other hand, parents may explicitly influence career choices through their expression of specific expectations in this regard [22].

*Liking;* linking was another highly reported response by students (64 %) themselves and they openly admitted that they like these careers or subjects over others and want to continue studies with these subjects as also clear in their statements e.g. “ I like mathematics because I want to become mathematician”, “ my parents want to study business but I like to be an engineer”. 24% Teachers and 10% parents also think that students own liking play an important role in subject selection as one parent reported that “ children choose subjects which they own want to study and do not listen their elders”. Likings or self interest is becoming important where families are educated and parents appreciate children’s liking and academic interest and allow them to choose by their own. While some parents also think that children of now a days are becoming more self centered and focus at their own choices rather than parent’s selections.

*Suitability for future:* it is well reported response by students themselves (61 %), their teachers (32 %) and parents (6 %). Students responses showed that informed and conscious decision making process is important and subjects should be planned in line with future success, as stated by students’, “One should study those subjects which he can apply later in his job”. Teachers perceive that because of internet and other sources of information now students think about their future more maturely than ever before, but parents were less confident about such capabilities of youth.

*Emotional decision making:* it is another theme that emerged in the data analysis which shows that 22 % of students, 28% of teachers and 49% parents agreed that emotional decision making lies in the career selection of students e.g. a student responded that “because my favorite teacher recommended me once to become a scientist so I will become a scientist” another student stated that “in my community, being a policeman is a thing of honor so I will join police”. This kind of behavior in students can be the result of their stage of adolescence where they are under huge impact of hormonal fluctuations that lead to immature behavior and affective way of decision making as well as they inspire easily from others.

*Any other:* varied kind of opinions came under this theme like career selection because of fame, money, importance, authority but its percentage was less than all other opinions (just 2 % opted this option).

### 3.2 QUESTION TWO: MOST INFLUENTIAL SIGNIFICANT FIGURE

second question was; in students’ career/subject selection, who is most influential? (Significant others like; *parents (mother/father-both), teachers, peer group*, economic factors, personal interests, occupational salaries or anything else). Results show that major responses came on the suggested categories while few responded on the open ended category of “anything else”. As expected majority reported parents as the most influential figure in the selection of career or subject, 58% students have opinion that their parents decide what to do and what to choose regarding their career concerns. Literature supports the above findings as Parental support and encouragement are important factors that have been found to influence career choice. Children may choose what their parents desire simply to please them. One consistent finding in research suggests that adolescents’ own aspirations are influenced by their parent’s aspirations or expectations [23]. But among both parents, Pakistani adolescents reported fathers (70%) as more dominating in career related suggestions than mothers and children mostly follow their fathers for the selection of any subjects.

29% teachers and 8% parents reported the same. Most of parents think that children do not listen them seriously and do whatever they want to do. While self interests (26 %) were rated second highest. In our patriarchal society children are under the strict discipline of parents whereas the moralities of collectivist culture teach students to obey their elders especially parent which is also highlighted in results. These findings suggest that parents are directly involved in the decision making process of their children regarding subject/career selection.

**3.3 QUESTION THREE: IMPORTANCE OF CAREER GUIDANCE**

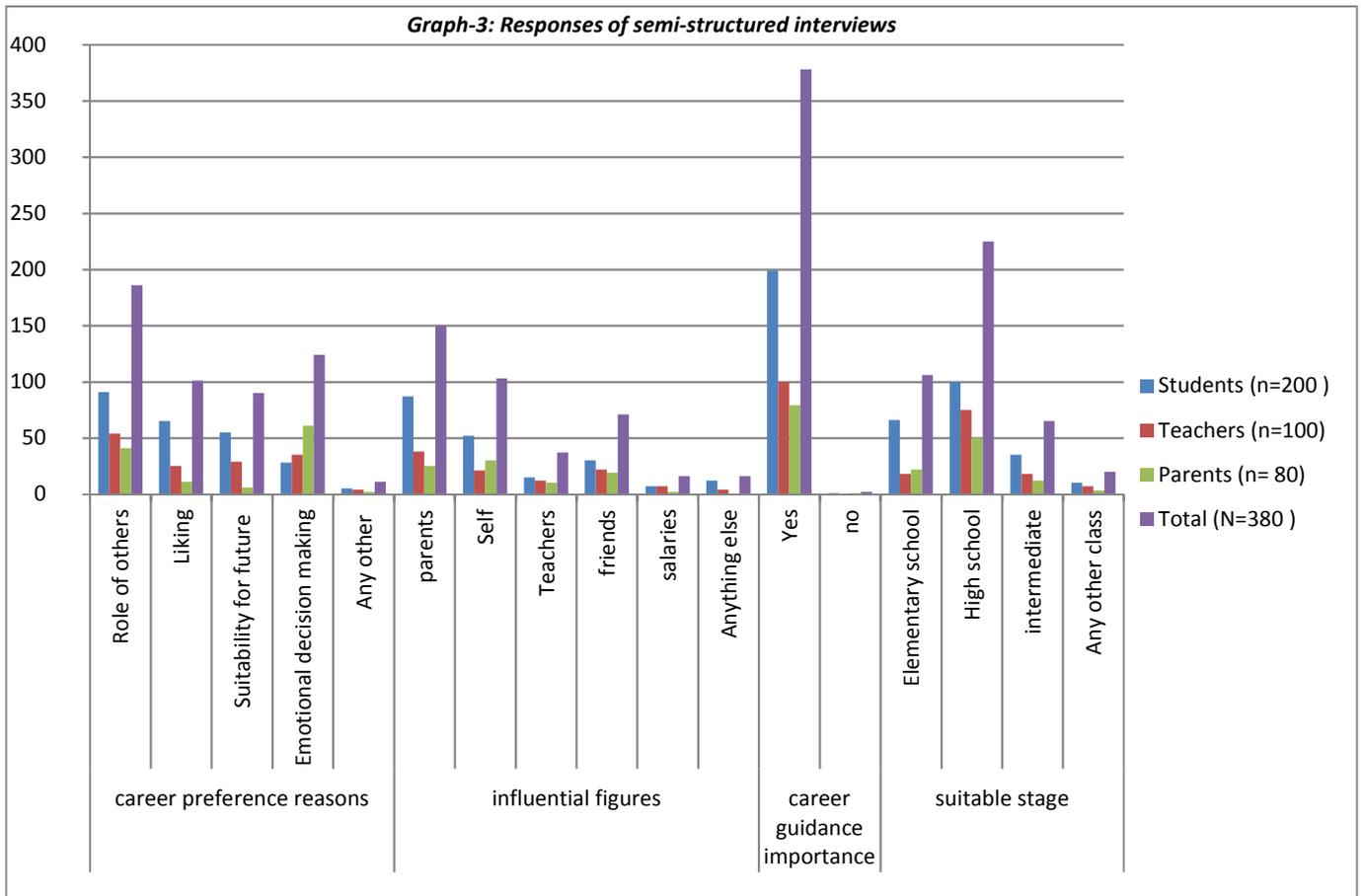
Second question was: Is it important to educate students for the selection of right career? (YES/ NO). Almost every participant (99% ) reported as yes except one student. Due to the exposure of media as well as the sample was taken from big cities where they had better literacy rate which make them understand the importance of career exploration and guidance programs.

**3.4 QUESTION FOUR: SUITABLE STAGE**

This question was about “At which stage children are at highest need to get career guidance/counseling (e.g. at elementary school, at start of high school when students are at the stage of subject selection or at intermediate level or after it)? Majority (50 % respondents) suggested high school as a most suitable stage for career guidance to provide. In the high school students choose subjects that further lead them to their respective occupations if they unable to choose the right subjects then it will lead to wrong occupation and ultimately unsatisfied life. Authors of one study recommended the use of any career counseling program to initiate at high school level because terrible lack of knowledge 8th graders have of the high school math, science and other curriculum make them less suitable for academic advising and planning while Participants in a high school career course saw small but statistically significant increases in both their career decision-making and vocational skills self-efficacy, indicating that they felt better able to make career-related decisions and perform career-related tasks when tested in a comparison group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders [24].

*Table 2: responses of structured interviews*

		Students (n=200 )	Teachers (n=100)	Parents (n= 80)	Total (N=380)
<b>career preference reasons</b>	Role of others	91	54	41	186
	Liking	65	25	11	101
	Suitability for future	55	29	6	90
	Emotional decision making	28	35	61	124
	Any other	5	4	2	11
<b>influential figures</b>	parents	87	38	25	150
	Self	52	21	30	103
	Teachers	15	12	10	37
	friends	30	22	19	71
	salaries	7	7	2	16
	Anything else	12	4	0	16
<b>career guidance importance</b>	Yes	199	100	79	378
	no	1	0	1	2
<b>suitable stage</b>	Elementary school	66	18	22	106
	High school	100	75	50	225
	intermediate	35	18	12	65
	Any other class	10	7	3	20



**4 CONCLUSION**

Present study was designed to explore the factors/significant others that influence the decision making process of students concerning their career choice/subject selection as well as the most suitable time for the implementation of career exploration program in the course of study. Data was collected from high school to university level students, their teachers and parents. From results it is concluded that parents are the most influential figures who impose their decisions on children’s career/subject selection while high school is the most suitable time where career counseling and exploration programs can effectively guide parents and children regarding the suitable career options.

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APPENDIX-A

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE (FOR STUDENTS)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Subjects: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_  
School/college name: \_\_\_\_\_

Career related questions;

1. Why you preferred this particular career/subject over others? Give reasons  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. In your career choice or subject selection, who was most influential (significant others ;*parents (mother/father-both), teachers, peer group*, economic factors, personal interests, occupational salaries or anything else)  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Is it important to educate students for the selection of right career?  
(YES/ NO) \_\_\_\_\_ If yes then
4. At which stage students are at highest need to get career guidance (e.g. at elementary school, high school or intermediate level or after it)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX-B

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE (FOR TEACHERS)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

School/college name: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview questions;

1. Why students prefer any career/subject over others? Give reasons

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2. In students' career/subject selection, who is most influential? (Significant others ;*parents (mother/father-both), teachers, peer group*, economic factors, personal interests, occupational salaries or anything else)

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3. Is it important to educate students for the selection of right career?

(YES/ NO) \_\_\_\_\_ If yes then

4. At which stage students are at highest need to get career guidance (e.g. at elementary school, high school or intermediate level or after it)?

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**APPENDIX-C**

**INTERVIEW GUIDELINE (FOR PARENTS)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Education: \_\_\_\_\_ Income: \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview questions;**

1. Why children prefer any career/subject over others? Give reasons

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. In child's career/subject selection, who is most influential? (Significant others ;parents (*mother/father-both*), teachers, peer group, economic factors, personal interests, occupational salaries or anything else)

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Is it important to educate children for the selection of right career?

(YES/ NO)\_\_\_\_\_ If yes then

4. At which stage children are at highest need to get career guidance/counseling (e.g. at elementary school, high school or intermediate level or after it)?

\_\_\_\_\_