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The Role of Academic Performance and Peer Influence in Senior High School Students' Programme Choice in Ghana

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study was to examine the determinants of students' choice of programme at the Senior High School (SHS) level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region of Ghana. It was a quantitative study underpinned by the positivist paradigm. The descriptive survey design was employed for the study. A self-developed questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 229 for the study. Multiple linear regression was used to analyse the data. The study found that students' general academic performance was the best predictor of students' choice of programme followed by advice from colleagues or peers of students. The study, therefore, recommended that the Ghana Education Service (GES) and Management of the Senior High Schools (SHSs), should work on equipping students with learning and research skills to enable them to enhance their self-efficacies and general academic performance.*

KEYWORDS: determinants, programme choice, senior high school, Gomoa East

INTRODUCTION

The Ghanaian education system has been structured into four levels, namely primary, Junior High School (JHS), Senior High School (SHS) and tertiary levels (universities, colleges of education

and nursing colleges among others). The primary school level takes six years, JHS, three years and three years of SHS. In all pre-tertiary education spans 12 years. Tertiary education ranges from two years to nine years. This is subject to the kind of programme and degree one wants to pursue and acquire (Diploma, First Degree, Masters or Doctor of Philosophy). Students' decision or choice-making points along the academic ladder happen at the end of JHS and SHS. Students make decisions or choices as to which programme to pursue at the SHS at the end of JHS education, and the same is done at the end of SHS to choose which programme to offer at the tertiary level. The choice of programme students make when entering Senior High school (SHS) is very critical for their future achievements. The choice of career students aspires for and the choice of programme they make when entering SHS is very crucial and related to each other. A poor choice of programme directs all individual efforts and resources in the wrong direction, particularly when not aligned with one's interests and expectations; would not only be frustrating but also draining of energy and waste of resources (Hagel & Shaw, 2010). This study in the context of the foregoing examines determinants of students' choice of programme at the SHS level focusing on the first years who had already made their academic programme choices.

Determinants of students' choice of academic programme

The specific academic programmes students pursue are determined by several factors, some of which are beyond the students' control. The factors which impact the choice of academic programme involve significant decisions which set the foundation for success or otherwise in life and career (Agrey & Lampadan, 2014). To some extent, the choice is significantly driven by some demographic characteristics of the students involved (Kinzie, et al., 2004). A review of studies on determinants of academic programme choice revealed that some prevalent elements across nations such as parental preference, mass media, the influence of peers, and cost associated with pursuing a particular programme drive the choice of the programmes (Baharun et al., 2011).

Similarly, Kankam and Onivehu (2000), Taylor and Buku (2006) found that intellectual ability, aptitudes, school, family, personality, self-esteem, values, interest, and environmental influences as determinants of students' choice of career. Mankoe (2007) also added the following list as factors that influence students' choice of career and related programmes; interests, abilities and personalities, life and work satisfaction, and employment variables. Students' low interest, content knowledge, and negative self-concept of ability as well as perceived lack of the chosen programme's relevance in line with anticipated careers are identified as possible driving forces affecting students' decision to either enrol and stay in a particular programme or not (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Merzyn, 2011). In advancing knowledge on the individual and personal factors that determine students' choice of programme, some researchers revealed that students select their major academic programmes that match their personality types and interest. (Worthington & Higgs, 2004; Asantewaa, 2020).

One wonders whether families of students play a role in students' crucial decision of programme choice. Shumba and Naong (2012) revealed that the family was a significant determinant that predicted the career and academic programme choices of secondary school students. Similarly, in a follow-up study, Kazi and Akhlaq (2017) examined the factors which affect the choice of

programme and career among students in two public sector universities in Lahore city, confirmed parental influence as the most significant factor in the choice of programme and career aspirations of students. Research revelations on the phenomenon of determinants driving students' choice of programme in other parts of the world are not quite different from those found in Ghana and Africa. In Hong Kong for instance, Law and Yuen (2011), Bardick, Berns, Magnusson and Witko (2004) revealed that students value the opinions of their parents, which implies that parents could inculcate an interest of certain programmes in their children from childhood. Bardick, Berns, Magnusson and Witko (2004) also found that Canadian adolescents tend to appreciate their parents' opinions more than any other source for answers to an academic programme and career-related issues. Many parents are in the position to influence their children's career development because they observe their children's development, know their interests and strengths, and have developed a trusting relationship with them (Geiger & Ogilby, 2000). In Singapore, it was revealed that parental involvement had a significant influence on the selection of nursing careers (Ching & Keith, 2011).

Some studies investigating the extent to which children are likely to choose programmes that are associated with their parents' backgrounds or occupations have been conducted in the last few years (Van de Werfhorst et al., 2001; Dryler, 1998). Van de Werfhorst et al. (2003) explored the implications of social class, economic and cultural standing on the choice of programme at Senior High and some higher education institutions in Britain and found that these factors immensely affect students' choice of programmes. At the same time, Payne (2003) has acknowledged that family background affects the tendency of obtaining good grades in school. Gostein (2000) similarly revealed that parents influence their children's programmes and career choices in several ways including acting as role models. He further mentioned that sometimes this influence comes in the form of order for the children to enrol in particular programmes. The first category of influence identified by Gostein (2000) was direct inheritance. With this, he meant that the adolescent is brought up based on the ideologies such as the family business which is the ward's inheritance. This indirectly compels the ward to choose a business programme to groom himself or herself well to fit the status. However, such a programme may not necessarily be related to the ward's inherent capabilities and interests as emphasized by the factor and trait theory. Another influence from parents is the inculcation of interest in their wards from infancy to pursue certain career paths which eventually inform academic programme choices (Berzin, 2010).

In a similar vein, Elacqua, Gobierno, and Ibanez (2005) revealed that parents across school types rated academic reasons as the most important factor in their wards 'programme choice. Likewise, Schneider and Buckley (2002) studied the search patterns of parents of schools on an educational website and found that, on average, parents looked at programmes that performed better academically (higher reading and mathematics scores) as their search progressed. In other words, parents eliminated programmes in which students were found to have poor academic performance. Myburgh (2005) also buttressed the foregoing findings with the revelation that relatives, the social environment, and governmental policies have a significant impact on individual students' academic programme choices.

Gregory (1998) has opined that in some instances, parents' choices for their wards are either in the same status category or above theirs. For instance, a parent who is a physician would encourage the ward to opt for the same career or one of the comparable pedigrees. In the same way, a skilled worker may encourage the child to emulate him or urge him to aim for a higher-level managerial position and this will influence the programme choice of the child. In this context, Holland's (1997) vocational theory's position is that parents must offer their children the right information necessary to make suitable programme choices. This will enable them to make their own future decisions and choices in life at every stage of life when there is a need to. This style is not practised in the Gomoa East District because some parents are not very well educated. Thus, parents rather motivate their wards to 'blindly' copy and become like their supposed role models without recourse to their wards' inherent traits and interests.

In relation to peers and friends, research has shown that students make their choices of programmes in school because of influence from friends or peers, the mass media, and the cost associated with the programme (Baharun et al., 2011; Pafili & Mylanakis, 2011). Ramirez and Dizon (2014) opined that some students erroneously believe that brilliant students offer the sciences and usually get influenced by this and choose those courses but only realized later that it was the wrong field for them. Given this, it is always important to let one's interest drive the choice of study rather than follow friends blindly.

In addition to the foregoing, Students' backgrounds and abilities are very critical in programme choice. Their ability to understand the concepts in a particular subject area could have a great impact on their decision regarding which programme they will enrol in and commit their efforts to learning (Mustapha & Long, 2010; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). In other words, if a person's ability does not match up with a particular programme, he or she would naturally go for an alternative one that would fit his/her level of understanding and abilities. Auyeung and Sands (2006), in a follow-up comparative study between Ghana and Australian high school students, revealed that the choice of business studies career was attributed to the driving force of general academic background, motivational factors such as good long-term earnings prospects, and the nature of teaching the programme may impact on career choice for Ghanaian students. Some studies have shown that parents' educational background, profession, and success of family relatives in the business environments do have a significant influence on the choice of business studies as a field of study among university students (Uyar & Ali, 2011). Malgwi, Howe and Bornaby (2005) were also of the view that high earning potential is not the only factor influencing career choice in business studies (accounting). They maintained that factors such as career advancement opportunity, prestige, social status, job security, and variety of choices are among the chief factors that have a significant influence on the career choice of accounting.

Maudline, Crain, and Mounce (2000) also discovered that the role of educators and the faculty was significant in the career and programme choice of prospective accountants. The study identified lifestyle, financial security and motivation, nature of work, and work roles as indicators of career choice in accounting. To this end, Asuquo (2011), indicated that the interest of the individuals, peer influence, prestige as well as lucrative prospects often affect the decision on programme choice in business studies. Kim and Markham (2002) in a similar vein, conducted a

study on business majors at the tertiary level (accounting, finance, general business, management, marketing, management information system, and double major). They discovered that the top five reasons for choosing programmes were: interest in a career, good job prospects of the course, a desire to run a business someday, and projected earnings in the related careers pertaining to the course. The last selected reasons for choosing a major course were the reputation of the major at the university, the perceived quality of instruction, the amount and type of promotional information, and the influence of friends. Kaur and Leen (2007) contributing to the discourse, established earlier that students' choices of major courses are influenced by factors such as gender, race, quantitative skills, interest in the subject, expected marketability, performance in major classes, the approachability and teaching reputation of faculty members. Meanwhile, Kusumwati et al. (2010) have found that the reputation of the institution involved is the most significant factor in a student's decision for further study and programme to read in a particular school. In addition to all these external influences, the trait and factor theory highlighted the need to acknowledge the inherent traits of the person involved (student or pupils) for the right choice to be made (Taylor & Buku, 2006).

It has been observed that the socio-economic background of students also contributes significantly to their choice of programmes of study at the SHS level since the fees paid for some programmes are higher than that of other programmes (Kusumwati et al., 2010). In light of the foregoing, Abubakar (2017 earlier revealed that the socioeconomic standing or income of students' families constitutes an essential aspect of what programme a student would pursue. In the same vein, society views some programmes as expensive. For example, a parent who is not economically sound will make it known to the ward why he or she should not choose Science-related programmes such as elective Science and Home Economics. These subjects are practical-oriented and demand the purchase of several materials and apparatus. If parents of such wards are not economically sound, they will not be able to provide the needed financial assistance and support for the wards to pursue such courses. On socio-economic standing, an associated factor is the distance from one's home to the preferred institution hosting the programme. Gibbons and Vignoles (2009) revealed that students originating from lower socio-economic backgrounds exhibited a lower attendance rate at high-quality institutions. Despite this, Holland's (1997) vocational theory cautions that there is a need for the person involved to possess enormous self-knowledge, self-awareness, and information required for choice or decision-making. In a modest form, however, this pathway is two-dimensional, consisting of monetary and non-monetary traits. A typical example of monetary characteristics is the direct costs associated with a particular programme (i.e. tuition and books) and the revenue stream envisaged as a result of choosing a particular programmeme. On the other hand, social influences, tradition, and the aesthetic content of the programme constitute the non-monetary aspect (Addadey, 2020).

Furthermore, high or low salaries associated with some occupations also determine what programme students will choose to pursue (Taylor & Buku, 2006). These variations in salaries influence students to opt for particular programmes instead of others (Hagel & Shaw, 2010). Odia (2014) earlier revealed that in Nigeria, job prospects, gender, and environmental factors significantly influence students' choice of Social Studies programme, whilst socioeconomic standing, teacher-related, and parental factors did not influence students' choice of Social Studies.

Furthermore, Demi, Coleman-Jensen and Synder (2010) have found that other determinants of the choice of programmes comprise tuition and financial assistance policies concerning the programme. Generally, high economic standing poses positive effects on students' choice of career as students and their parents usually tend to take into consideration the associated cost of education before pursuing a particular programme of study. More often than not, higher levels of parental economic standing are strongly aligned with post-secondary school attainment (Demi, Coleman-Jensen & Synder, 2010). Although these are external influences, the Trait-And-Factor theory stresses the need to acknowledge one's inherent traits amid all these externalities (Parson, 1909). The theory believes that it is only when the internal traits are in congruence with environmental factors that someone can progress. It would thus be proper if pupils in the Gomoa East District have ample exposure to such information to guide them in determining their choice of academic programmes at the SHS.

The choice of an academic programme is also influenced by factors such as gender, socio-economic status, better academic performance, parents' occupation and education level, and parental expectations (Adragna, 2009; Berzin, 2010; Domenico & Jones, 2006). These factors influence the norms against which adolescents compare themselves and the context within which goals are pursued. Several studies show that students all over the world are usually faced with a dilemma in making a career choice decision in their lives (Bandura et al. 2001; Cherian 1991; Issa & Nwalo 2008; Macgregor 2007; McMahon & Watson, 2005; Watson et al. 2010). In most cases, the choice of careers, subjects, and courses of study and the subsequent career paths to follow are a nightmare for prospective Senior High students (Issa & Nwalo, 2008).

Several studies have been conducted in places with differences in social settings and geographical location. For instance, a study among Optometry students by Kobia-Acquah, Owusu, Akuffo, Koomson and Pascal (2020) found that females were twice more likely to practice optometry and pursue an interest in pediatric optometry than males. A similar study in Sultanate of Oman by Al-Bahrani, Allawati, Shindi and Bakkar (2020) also revealed that females have higher scores on career aspiration than males. Similarly, in Hong Kong, Tsui, Lee, Hui, Chun and Chan (2019) also established that the academic and career aspirations of adolescents and their destinations are shaped by parental influences and outcomes of public examination results.

Shumba and Naong (2012) also found that the ability of the learner and teachers were significant factors that influence the career choice and aspirations of students in South Africa. Willcoxson and Wynder (2010) are of the view that predetermined career plans are good predictors of higher school achievement because they help students demonstrate greater interest in their coursework. Adeokun and Opoko (2015) also affirm that students with greater clarity about why they choose their course and whether the chosen course has a direct pathway to their preferred career have better outcomes in terms of academic performance.

On institutional link determinants of programme choice, Quansah, Ankoma-Sey and Dankyi (2020) explored the factors influencing SHS female students' selection of STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) related programmes in tertiary institutions in Ghana. It was discovered that school-linked indicators like elective mathematics status, course of study,

and interest in science and mathematics, affected the choice of STEM-related programmes by female students. Home-related factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, parents' educational level) and personal factors (e.g., locus of control, career indecision, self-confidence) also played a significant role in the choice of STEM-related programmes by female SHS students.

Agbo et al. (2015) hold the view that career aspiration is the professional path one wishes to follow and maintain; it is a lifelong process that requires accurate perceptions of ability, strength, potential, and achievement. The role of parents can neither be overemphasized nor underestimated in pupils' choices, especially in the area of choosing a programme for Senior High School education since they have a portion to sign on the form of the choice of programme (GES, 2019). Therefore, Sarkodie, Asare and Asare (2020) recommended that parents should always take time to discuss academic issues with their wards rather than imposing their opinions on them.

This is achieved through the play materials they offer to the children, the encouragement or discouragement of interests, the activities they motivate their wards to partake in, and the experiences they offer in the family (Gostein, 2000; Tucci, 2005). For example, a medical doctor encourages the ward to read science at the Senior High level. In the U.S. for instance, an estimated 44 percent of physicians' sons prefer to read medicine whilst 28 percent of lawyers' wards choose law (Yao, 1999). Again, role model constitutes another type of parental control. Gostein (2003) has reported that this situation works well when the ward identifies closely with the parent. Mortimer (2005) also reported having realized a validation for this when he reported that a combination of prestigious paternal role models together with a close father-son or mother-daughter interaction facilitated a very efficient parental transfer of career values and influence on children's choices. Such children adhere to their parents' choices in order not to offend them (Gostein, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

Independent Variable **Dependent Variable**

Determinants of Programme Choice

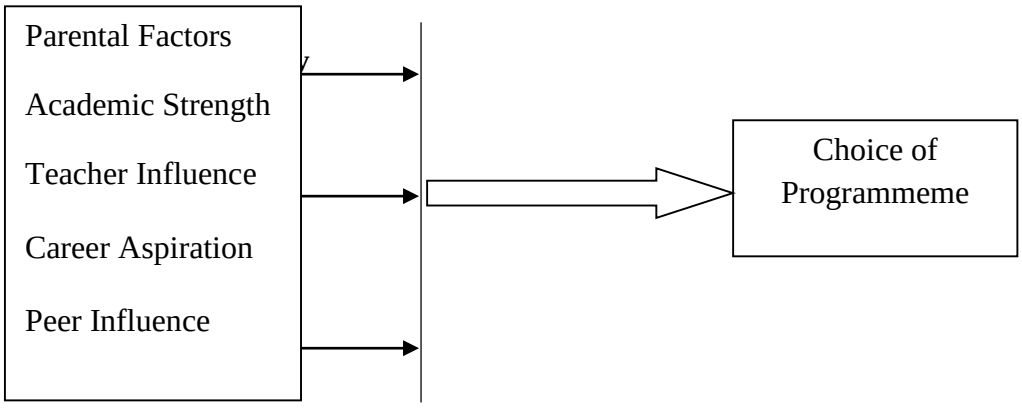

Figure 1: **Determinants of students' choice of programme at the Senior High School.**

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 depicts the determinants of students' choice of programme at the Senior High School. Academic strength, parental factors, career aspiration, peers, and teacher influence are the independent or predictor variables whilst the choice of programme (General Arts, Business, General Science, and Home Economics) is the dependent variable.

Webster's International Dictionary (1998) defines choice as the voluntary act of selecting or separating from two or more things that which is preferred; and the determination of the mind in preferring one thing to another. The definition incorporates two components: First is the availability of alternatives, which presents an objective reality, and the second one, is the act of preference, which involves a subjective process. If a reference to career choice is made, the availability of career choices and the dynamics of choosing a career should be examined. Hence, in order for career choice to take place, there should be alternative career routes available and there should be an individual preference between these career options. A choice is a decision that most human beings make at some time in their lives; it is a decision that should be given careful consideration since it can affect the rest of a person's life and determines one's future career (Som, 2016).

The educational system in Ghana has three main transitional stages. It includes the basic level (Primary and Junior High Education). The second stage is a 3-year Senior High School Education, and the final stage is a 3 or 4-year tertiary education which comprises several different programmes and courses offered in Universities, Technical Universities, Colleges of Education, and other tertiary institutions. Final-year students in Junior High Schools are required to select their preferred academic programmes for SHSs. These programmes determine to a large extent, which courses he/she can pursue at the University or other higher institutions of learning as well as where one's future career destination will be. Table 1 shows the programmes offered at the SHS and their prospective careers.

Table 1: The table shows the programmes offered and their prospective Careers

Programme	Prospective Careers
General Art	Nursing, Teaching, Accountant, Communicator Editor
Business	Accountants, Financial Analysts, Bank Managers, Cashiers Business Advisors, Investment Managers, Auditors, Teachers
General Science	Doctor, Nurse, Teacher, Physician, Lab Technician
Visual Arts	Artist, Graphic Designer, Painter, Print Making, Film Making
Home Economics	Nutritionists, Caterers, Managers of Restaurants, Dietician and so on.

These choices have many implications for success in life and in the same vein pupils too are confronted with choice-making regarding specific programmes to read at the Senior High School level.

There is a centralized application system in which admission to Senior High School is premised and referred to as the Computerized School Selection and Placement System (CSSPS) application to Senior High School (Ajayi, 2011).

With this, gaining admission into SHS for a programme is solely based on students' ranking of their preferred programmes of interest together with their performance at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) which is a nationally administered examination meant to select quailed candidates into SHS. This implies that programme choice is determined by students' performance in BECE. For example, if a student decides to do science at a particular Senior High School and does not attain the required grade point, she/he would not be permitted unless she decides to do a different programme. Since the programme of choice influences the choice of school, more often than not, pupils' choice of programme emerges from the outcome of discussions between students and significant people in their lives such as parents, teachers, or friends. This choice goes in line with the position of Holland's Vocational theory because it acknowledges the need for counsellors to educate parents on the need to study and identify the personality type of their wards to guide them to make better course choices that suit their personalities.

Problem Statement

It is evident that many students make wrong choices in relation to their programme of study at the secondary school level because of ignorance, inexperience, peer pressure, advice from friends, parents, and teachers, or tags attached to certain programmes without adequate knowledge (Salami, 1999). The SHS students including those in the Gomoa East district are challenged with several of these life issues of making choices in their education as well as their everyday endeavours.

Junior High students find themselves in a dilemma as to which choice of programme will commensurate with their future career aspirations and some end up selecting programmes that do not match their backgrounds or academic strengths (Takyi 2011). Research on students' choice of programmeme was done by different scholars and nearly all agreed that students' selection of programmemes is affected by their career aspirations, careful planning, and influence from parents, teachers, peers, and siblings (Adinkrah & Ayarkwa 2020; Takyi 2011; Mankoe 2007; Baharun et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2006). The researchers further revealed that students' selection of programmes was driven by the outcome of public examination results, students' personalities, and environmental factors. Unfortunately, it appears that there is no available scientific study on this phenomenon in the Gomoa East District to assess the determinants of students' choice of programme at the SHS level. The current study was designed to fill this research gap.

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Research Question

What are the determinants that best predict first-year students' choice of programme at the Senior High School level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region?

METHODOLOGY

Design, Population and Sample

The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. This design enabled us to gather data in a way that provided information on the determinants of students' choice of programme. The target population for this study comprised all Senior High School (SHS) students in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region. The district has four SHSs, two public schools, and two private schools, totalling 2,006 first-year senior high school students in the district made up of 1,024 females and 982 males. The accessible population comprised all 1,144 first-year public senior high school students in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region comprising 629 females and 515 males.

A sample of 229 f was drowned from 1,144 students using Kumar's (2019) criteria for sample selection which posits that 20–50 percent of the population is suitable for a descriptive study.
Respondents for each school were calculated using the mathematical formula; Number of first-year students in a particular school divided by the accessible population of first-year students, multiplied by the sample size.
For example;
Number of first-year students at Fetterman SHS = 453
Total number of accessible populations = 1,144
Selected sample size = 229
453/1,144*229 = 91.
Therefore, the sample size for Fettehman SHS was 91 first-year students. The sample for the males-female strata for Fettehman SHS was calculated and presented in Table 2 using the formula;

$$\frac{\text{Accessible population}}{M/F} = \frac{\text{Sample size for Fetterman}}{X}$$

Where M/F stand for accessible males or females.
For example; $\frac{1,144}{515} \times \frac{91}{X} = 41$
This was replicated in selecting samples for the Ahmadiya SHS too.

Table 2: Distribution of Samples Across SHSs in Gomoa East District

School	Accessible population	Sample	Boys	Girls
1. Ahmadiya SHS	691	138	62	76
2. Fettehman SHS	453	91	41	50
Total	1,144	229	103	126

Source: Fieldwork (2021)

Based on prepared sampling frames from each school, the systematic sampling approach was used to select the sample size of 229.

Data Collection Instrument

The main data collection instrument was a self-constructed questionnaire on the Students' Choice of Academic Programme (SCAP). The instrument had two sections (A and B). the A section focused on determinants of students' choice of programme and section B dealt with students' choice of academic programmes. the items in the instrument were measured on a four-point unilinear Likert scale ranging from 1- 4. (1-Strongly Disagree (SD),2-Disagree (D), 3-Agree (A) and 4-Strongly Agree (SA).

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity of the study, the questionnaire it was given to questionnaire item construction experts and some senior lecturers in Measurement and Evaluation at the Department of Education and Psychology for their expert assessment. With this, both face and content validity were ensured. Regarding reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested at the Odorgonno SHS in the Ga South District in Accra. This school was used because it is also a public senior high school and had similar administrative structures, offers the same programmes, and had similar physical and emotional characteristics as those of the selected SHSs for the main study. A reliability test was carried out on the pre-tested questionnaire and a reliability coefficient of 0.75 was obtained.

Ethical Considerations

The consent of all the respondents was sought before their involvement in the study. To ensure informed consent and participation in the study processes, the participants were debriefed about the purpose of the study. They were given a written consent form to read and freely decide to participate in the study by signing. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process. For this reason, their names were not required on the questionnaire so that no traces could be made of them with respect to their responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question: What are the determinants that best predict first-year students' choice of programme at the Senior High School level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region?

This research question sought to examine the determinants that best predicted first-year students' choice of programme at the SHS level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region. The data were analysed using multiple linear regression and presented in Table 3.

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Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression of the Determinants that best Predict First-Year Students' Choice of Programmeme

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	5.575	.471		11.841	< .001	.759	1.318
Teacher Advice	.009	.090	.007	.096	.924	.898	1.114
Future Prospect	.003	.079	.003	.037	.971	.917	1.090
Parents Selection	.001	.089	.001	.015	.988	.757	1.320
Colleagues Advice	.216	.132	.124	1.637	.103	.918	1.090
Career Aspiration	.006	.086	.005	.068	.946	.900	1.111
Academic Performance	.199	.072	.192	2.768	.006*	.759	1.318
R			.206				
R Square (R^2)			.042				
Adjusted R Square			.016				

Source: Fieldwork (2021) F = 1.632; df = (6, 222); (N = 229); VIF = Variance Inflation Factor *$p < .05$
Dependent Variable: Students' choice of Programmeme

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The tolerance values in Table 3 were not less than 10 which is within an acceptable threshold (Pallant, 2016). Also, the VIF results met the acceptable standard which requires that VIF values must be less than 10. For this reason, there is no problem with multicollinearity since both the tolerance and variance inflation factor results met the acceptable cut-off points. Therefore, a multiple linear regression model was run to examine the determinants that best predict first-year students' choice of programme.

The results from Table 3 show that teachers' advice (β = .009, p = .924), future prospects (β = .003, p = .971), parents' selection of programme (β = .001, p = .988), colleagues' advice (β = .216, p = .103) and career aspiration of students (β = .006, p = .946) have no statistically significant influence on their choice of programme ($p > .05$). This result means that teachers' advice, future prospect, parents' selection of programme, colleagues' advice and career aspiration are not best predictors of first-year students' choice of programme. Conversely, Table 3 shows that there is a statistically significant positive effect of first-year students' academic performance on their choice of programme (β = .199, $p < .05$), F (6, 222) = 1.632, $p < .05$, with an R^2 of .042).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The research question sought to examine the determinants that best predicted first-year students' choice of programme at the SHS level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region. The results result mean that teachers' advice, future prospect, parents' selection of programme, colleagues' advice, and career aspiration are not the best predictors of first-year students' choice of programme. The results suggest that first-year students' academic performance is the determinant that best predicts their choice of programme. Also, it means that first-year students' academic performance positively influences their choice of programme.

The findings of the study contradicted previous research on the fact that students' selection of academic programmemes is determined by students' career aspirations, careful planning, and influence from parents, teachers, peers, and siblings (Adinkrah & Ayarkwa, 2020; Baharun, 2011; Takyi, 2011; Hagel & Shaw,2008; Mankoe, 2007; Taylor et al., 2006). The study's finding implies that students' academic strength, academic success, or performance encourages them to know the required programmeme to choose at the SHS. For instance, when a student performs well, he/she is inspired to look at the programmeme that will be suitable for him or her based on his/her future and career aspirations.

The results of the study imply that advice from teachers, the future prospect of a programme, parents' selection of programme, colleagues' influence, and career aspiration are not determinants that predict students' choice of programme. On the other hand, the result of the study revealed that students' general academic performance influences or best predicts students' choice of programme.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study revealed that the determinant that best predicts students' choice of programme at the SHS level in the Gomoa East District of the Central Region was students' general academic performance followed by advice from peers of students. This revelation contradicts other findings as indicated earlier which reported that career aspiration, teacher, and parental factors as the best determinants of students' choice of programme at the SHS level. The study, therefore, concludes that parents and management of SHSs should work hard on equipping teachers with all the necessary educational logistics that they need to teach well, and build students' self-efficacy in order to enhance their general academic strength and performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Educational guidance and counselling programmes be regularly organised for students at Junior High Schools (JHSs) to enable them to make informed choices regarding the choice of their academic programmes of study at the SHS level.
2. Ghana Education Service (GES) and Management of SHSs, should work on supplying students with learning and research skills to enable them to improve their general academic performance.

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