

## Career Decision Experience of Elementary School Teachers with Professional Counseling Competencies in Taiwan

**Yii-nii Lin**

Center for Teacher Education  
Institute of Learning Sciences  
National Tsing Hua University  
Hsinchu City, Taiwan

**Yueh Hua Chen**

Institute of Learning Sciences  
National Tsing Hua University  
Hsinchu City, Taiwan

### Abstract

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*This study aimed to depict the career decision experience of elementary school teachers in Taiwan, with certifications of both elementary school teacher and school counselor, to choose becoming a teacher instead of a school counselor. The study adopted phenomenology qualitative research method with semi-structured in-depth interviews. Eight (7 females and 1 male) elementary school teachers with average age about 25 years old participated in this study. The results showed that the main factors affecting their career decision-making were as follows: fit between the role of being teacher/school counselor and their career goals, utilization and comparison of teaching and counseling, the impact of significant others, and the impact of Taiwan's educational and sociocultural systems, and the impact of university major and employment environment. In summary, the participants' decision to become teachers were the product of their interest of education, the influence of significant others, educational system, sociocultural factors, employment environment, professional recognition, and career goals.*

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**Key words:** teacher, guidance teacher, decision-making, education, counseling, elementary school

Teaching and counseling competencies are regarded as the two important requirements among educators. Teachers with counseling knowledge, attitude and skills are often deemed as more capable in communicating with students, managing a class, handling student issues, and improving students' learning effectiveness. Meanwhile, counseling professionals must possess teaching competencies and understandings on learning and growth issues in order to work in the education systems and provide services to students. These two professions are quite similar in certain aspects; therefore, some students choose to study both and be certified as teacher and school counselor. How do students with both certifications make their career decisions? This study depicted the career decision experience of university-trained elementary school teachers in Taiwan, with both certifications, to take the path as a teacher rather than a school counselor.

### Career Decision-making

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) choice model is one of the models explaining complex factors both within and outside the locus of control of individuals. This theory, proposed by Lent et al. (1994; 2010), treats the development of career goals and choices as functions of interactions among self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interest over time. Career choice is a process in which individuals and their environment mutually influence each other. This process involves the specification of primary career choices or goals, actions for the achievement of goals, and performance experience as feedback on the suitability of goals.

The SCCT considered career decision as the result of the interplay among learning experience (e.g., university learning experiences, the source of self-efficacy and outcome expectations), personal growth/background experience (e.g., parental influence and family-related factors, gender and race or ethnicity) and sociocultural context (e.g., sociocultural value of higher education, sociocultural, economic, and employment factors).

Career decisions are valuable or meaningful career development choices made by individuals based on their self-understanding, educational factors, and job information (Tien, 2000). Intrapersonal characteristics related to career decisions include individual developmental features, capabilities and skills, and mental health status (Li, 2010). External or environmental factors, such as high unemployment rate among university graduates, could lead many students to choose secure or popular jobs (Chen, 2005). Shih (2010) revealed that university students' self-concept is significantly correlated to their career decisions. By dissecting the decision-making process underwent by 11 undergraduates who sought departmental transfer, Chu and Rau (2000) clustered relevant factors into five categories: individual characteristics, decision-making skills, cognitive structure, environmental factors, and learning experience.

### **Literature Review in Taiwan**

In Taiwan, teacher is a profession with high social status and public school teachers are often regarded as a very secure job (Chen, 2008). Counseling professionals in Taiwan must pass the license examination to become certified counselors. If they want to become school counselors at elementary or middle schools, they are required to complete certain amount of counseling/guidance credits and pass the teacher certification test. After the Law of Student Guidance has enacted and implemented in 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015), the demands for school counselors has been increasing.

School counselors and teachers are both professions in assisting students to conquer difficulties, solving problems, and improving learning and development. However, the major difference between the two lays on the nature of recipients. The recipients of education are more diverse and normal, the educational function is more for prevention, the targets are in classes or groups, and with a longer period of interaction; while for counseling, the recipients are more unique or abnormal, the counseling function is more for correction, the targets are individuals, and with a shorter period of interaction (Liu, 1997).

Previous literature supported the importance of training in counseling among teachers (Chang, 2000; Hong, 2010; Lin, 2011; Shiao, 2013). Teachers should properly utilize their counseling competencies in teaching and facilitating the growth and development of students (Chang, 2000; Lin, 2011). After surveyed 85 elementary school teachers and 843 students, Shiao (2013) concluded that teachers' counseling attitude, counseling skills, and overall counseling competencies positively correlated with teacher-student relationships. Yang (2015) found that, among the 5,521 elementary school teachers surveyed, teachers' counseling competencies had a significantly positive impact on their self-efficacy. Surveyed 307 elementary school teachers, Tsai (2002) concluded that teachers' counseling competencies correlated positively with their utilization of these competencies.

By interviewed 15 (6 males and 9 females) married incumbent teachers, Li (1992) found that their career development focuses were professional competency, sense of achievement, occupational prestige and development, sense of security, independence and freedom. Chen (1998), interviewed ten incumbents or who used to be school counselors in the in junior high schools, found that their career decisions were related to their parents' expectations, results on the university entrance examination, and personal career ambitions. Parents either made the children's occupational decisions or influenced their decisions through expectations (Tsai, 1996; Yeh & Han, 2013). Education, family and sociocultural elements are the factors affecting individuals' career interests and, subsequently, their career decisions.

### **Literature Review in West**

Carrington et al. (2010) categorized teachers' self-recognition into professional recognition, social status recognition, and personal recognition. Teachers' self-recognition had impact on their career decisions and professional role positioning (Mantei & Kervin, 2011). Tyler and Stokes (2002) studied factors for students to become teachers. Personal factors included loving to spend time with students, trusting students, having experience in teaching related jobs (for instance, tutoring), being inspired by their teachers, relatively stable job contents and salary compensation, and teacher's high social status. Professional factors included unique sense of mission, teaching, guiding, and training students could be a way to give back to the society. They also investigated factors influencing students' expectations as a teacher in the future.

Personal factors included pride to be a teacher, enhancing students' self-respect and confidence, assisting students to reach goals, building relationships and mutual trust with students, becoming a member of the academic community, and having a stable job and income. Professional factors included establishing good teacher-student relationships to encourage students, developing innovative curriculum, helping students to learn difficult skills, being able to practice inclusiveness when teaching, listening to and accepting different types of students, and improving one's professional status on campus.

### **Method**

Phenomenology entails a careful description of ordinary conscious experience of everyday life (the life-world) and the essential structures of consciousness as an individual or a group of individuals experienced them (Schwandt, 1997). Individual subjective experiences and their meanings can be uncovered, expressed and illuminated. Through this approach, the researchers intend to construct an authentic and comprehensive description of participants' decision-making experiences of becoming a teacher rather than a counselor. This type of qualitative research allows for a rich description of the participants' decision-making process in their own words.

### **Participants**

Eight elementary school teachers (7 females and 1 male) between 23 to 28 years old in age (with an average of 24.85) voluntarily participated in this study. Three participants majored in education and minored in counseling, the other 5 participants majored in counseling and minored in elementary school education program. The average length of service is 3.8 years. A snowball method was employed to recruit the participants till data saturation. The three main criteria on selecting participants were: (1) they were trained in both teaching and counseling; (2) they had been certified as elementary school teachers and school counselors in Taiwan; and (3) they had been struggling to choose either as elementary school teacher or counselor in career and decided to become a teacher instead of a counselor.

### **Interviewer**

The second author conducted eight in-depth interviews for this study. Prior to the study, she completed training in interviewing skills, counseling, qualitative research, and research methodology. Before conducting the interviews, she worked in several pilot studies to refine her interviewing skills. Her goal was to establish trust-based relationships with the participants, and to remain open and nonjudgmental during the interviews.

### **Researchers**

The first author has served as a teacher, counseling psychologist, and advisor in teacher education program at a university in Taiwan. She, with more than 26 years of experience in counseling and 17 years of teaching experience in higher education, recognized the importance of university students' career decision-making. The second author has a bachelor's degree in education with a minor in counseling, and currently enrolled in a master learning science program. She has completed training in both elementary teacher education and school counseling programs; therefore, she is familiar with the teaching and counseling/guidance fields at the elementary schools in Taiwan.

### **Data Collection**

The second author invited the first participant, who had already been working as an elementary teacher for two years, for a taped interview. Using a snowball sampling method, the first participant referred her to the next participant, and so on. When an interview was completed, the digital file was transcribed immediately. The researchers kept reading the transcripts until the point of data saturation was reached to terminate data collection.

The second author scheduled appointments with the prospective participants by telephone or e-mail. The eight interviews were conducted within a one-month period to generate the principal data for this study. Each semi-structured interview consisted of broad, general, and open-ended questions, and lasted for 90-120 minutes. Interview questions included the following: (1) Please describe the motives of majoring and/or minoring in education and counseling program in the university; (2) Please describe the process of pursuing and completing counseling and teaching training; and (3) Please describe the factors and process of making the career decision of becoming an elementary teacher rather than a school counselor. Participants were encouraged to describe, as completely, clearly, and concretely as they could, their perceptions about their peer-mentoring experiences over the course of their graduate studies.

## **Data Analysis**

The authors were the data analysts. Procedures for data analysis proposed by Creswell (2009) were adopted. The analysts (1) organized and prepared the data for analysis which involved transcribing interviews, reviewing materials, typing up field notes, and sorting the data; (2) read through all the data to obtain a general sense of the information, reflected on its overall meaning, wrote notes, and recorded general thoughts about the data; (3) began detailed analysis utilizing a coding process by organizing the materials into segments; (4) used the coding to generate a description of the setting or people as well as the categories or themes involving a detailed rendering of information about people, places, or events in a setting; (5) built additional layers of complex analysis and shaped themes into a general description in phenomenology; and (6) went beyond description and theme identification and into complex theme connections.

Criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adopted, as well as the strategies proposed by Gibbs (2007). The analysts (1) documented the steps of the procedures and set up a detailed protocol and database; and (2) checked transcripts to ensure accuracy, constantly compared data with the codes. Strategies proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000) were also utilized: (1) triangulated different data sources by examining evidence and built a coherent justification for themes accordingly; (2) employed member checking to determine the accuracy of the findings; (3) utilized rich descriptions to convey the messages, brought readers to the setting, communicated the discussion with the essence of shared experiences, and generated faithful and rich findings; (4) initiated self-reflection to create an open and honest narrative; (5) presented negative or discrepant information contradictory to the themes; and (6) spent a prolonged period of time in the field, developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

## **Results**

Most of the participants recognized the importance of guidance and counseling competencies for teachers. They believed teachers with counseling competencies could bring needed skills, knowledge, and attitudes to work with students and to enhance students' learning and development. All participants had struggled in choosing either teacher or counselor as their occupation. Five themes were emerged from the data analysis in revealing their career decision-making experience.

### **Fit between the role of being a teacher/school counselor and their career goals**

The participants had compared the roles and job contents of the two professions and considered the role and function of a teacher would be a better fit for their career goals. They expressed that teachers would have more control over the teaching career; their interactions with students would deepen the teacher-student relationships, and thus, would have stronger influence on students. One participant mentioned "I hope to observe students' transformation over a long period of time..., so after long thought, I decided that being a teacher is a better fit for me so I can have long-term influences on students!"

They also mentioned that being a school counselor could only allow them interact with very few students in the counseling room. The short contact time and limited opportunities would be difficult for a counselor to pull any influence on students. One participant said, "Counselors only have short term relationship with clients, normally 6 to 10 individual counseling sessions. I would like to have close teacher-student relationships. I want to shape my students in several years of time, and then say farewell to them rather than just 6 short sessions." The participants would like to build close and long-term relationships with students, and felt like being teachers would better suit their career goals.

### **Utilization and comparison of teaching and counseling**

Teachers, as the participants expressed, could combine their teaching competencies with counseling knowledge, attitude and skills in teaching, managing classes, and dealing with student issues. Such integration of teaching and counseling competencies could facilitate the learning and growth of students, strengthen interaction with students, and receive direct student feedback. One participant emphasized, "Oh, I really love to hear feedback from my students, I think teachers need this."

Participants held that frequent interactions with students could provide teachers firsthand observations of their students' characteristics, habits, life, and behaviors. One participant, who had past experience in leading a student camp, shared, "On the last day of the camp event, I was surprised that we were really connected, ... the interactions between me and the students were so close and we built a bond to influence each other." The positive experience as a camp teacher had fortified her motives to become a teacher later on.

It seemed to them that teachers would be easier to get feedback from students and frequent interactions would provide greater opportunities in guiding students.

In contrast, the participants believed that school counselors could provide counseling services to students; however, they would less likely be able to incorporate their teaching competencies, such as teaching strategy or class management skills, into the counseling process. Furthermore, for reasons such as counselors and students are usually constrained in the counseling room, the number of students required counseling is usually very small and with very limited contact time, counseling ethics had to be strictly complied, it is difficult for a school counselor to approach the majority of the student body and harder to receive feedback from them. Compared to teachers, the participants felt that impact of the school counselors on students are limited.

### **Impact of significant others**

Significant others, such as family members and teachers, certainly have impact on one's career decisions. Majority of the participants stated that their family members had significant influence on their university majors and career decisions. Several participants mentioned that their parents believe teacher is a meaningful, noble occupation with good social status and stable income. However, their parents did not know much about the counseling profession, and thus, they could not provide any opinions on counselor as an occupation. Some participants recalled being taught by a great teacher and regarded that teacher as their role model; while some were disappointed by certain teachers and those were their inspirations to become great teachers. One participant said, "I had many frustrated experiences in interacting with my teachers, so I thought to myself that I wanted to become a great teacher to help my students and inspire them in a different way."

### **Impact of Taiwan's educational and sociocultural systems**

Chinese hold teacher as the profession with high regard and teachers have a good social status. The participants inclined to recognize teachers' social status as well as their personal, social, and professional reputation. Although counselors may be gaining its importance in Taiwan, their social status and professional image are not yet as highly recognized. In addition, as teachers are the majority of the school faculty, the participants believed becoming teachers would better leverage their influence on campus and the educational system.

### **Impact of university major selection and employment environment**

The participants chose to become teachers based on the practical employment environment and other factors. One participant told us that she seized a teaching job opportunity right before graduation, "I am practical when it comes to finding a job. There was this opportunity for a job matching of an elementary school, so I just took the chance." A few of participants believed their becoming teachers were the result of both practical concerns and opportunities. One participant mentioned that her university entrance exam scores qualified her for the admission of a teachers college, "At the time (after the university entrance exam), I didn't know what my interests and strengths were, so I just enrolled the teachers college based on my scores." She became a teacher after graduation. Another participant who was awarded with a scholarship program for excellent teachers when studying in the university expressed, "Since I won that scholarship and I had the motive to become a teacher, so I just went for it. I had around 600 hours of teaching practice at the time and had gone to all the remote areas in Taiwan to tutor students." She had completed all the scholarship required trainings and then became a teacher.

### **Discussion**

Beside of their interest of education, the participants' decision to become teachers were the product of the influence of significant others, educational system, sociocultural factors, employment environment, professional recognition, and career goals. Their comparison of the utilizations of teaching and counseling professions reflected Liu's (1997) findings that counselors could only interact with very limited number of students in a short period of time and with very unique cases. While teachers would be able to serve an extensive base of students, to prevent problems before happening, and to have long-term interactions with students.

The participants' career decisions demonstrated their self-understanding, educational factors, and job information (Tien, 2000). Their decisions were related to their intrapersonal characteristics, such as their capabilities and skills (Chu & Rau, 2000; Li, 2010; Shih, 2010) and various external factors, such occupation status, reputation, and power on campuses, educational systems, and society (Chen, 2005; Chu & Rau, 2000). Their career choices could be viewed as functions of interactions among individual self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and interest over time, as stated in SCCT (Lent et al., 1994).

Every decision was the result of the interplay among learning experience (e.g., university learning experiences, especially in teaching and guidance), personal growth/background experience (e.g., parental influence and family-related factors) and sociocultural context (e.g., socio-cultural value of teaching and counseling).

Their recognition of teaching as a profession also contributed to their decision to become teachers. Recognition included professional recognition, social status recognition, and personal recognition (Carrington et al., 2010). The participants tended to think teachers enjoyed higher respect and recognition than counselors in Taiwan. They decided to focus on the teaching profession and combine the counseling competencies in their teaching; they valued that teachers could interact with students on a long term basis to establish teacher-student relationships. This result supported that factors for university students to become teachers included favoring in interacting with students, wanting to establish trustworthy relationships with students, and hoping to leverage influence on students (Tyler & Stokes, 2002). The participants expected to be inclusive and to listen to, accept, and empathize with students of various backgrounds. They were inspired by their past teaching experience to have great passion in teaching and full of sense of mission, and would like to exert influence to students over a long period of time.

The participants emphasized the impact of their significant others on their career choices, family members (particularly parents) favored education or counseling as their majors, and supported their career decisions to become teachers. This echoed previous research finding that parents wanted to influence children's career choices (Chen, 1998; Tsai, 1996; Yeh & Han, 2013). They also expressed the point highlighted by Tyler and Stokes (2002) that one of the reasons for them to become teachers was that they were deeply influenced by their teachers, some were role models and others were bad examples, in making their future career decisions.

The results also showed that the participants tended to think the social status of teachers to be higher than counselors, as well as the professional autonomy and sense of control. The results supported that the focus of teachers' career goals included professional capability, sense of achievement, occupational prestige and development (Li, 1992). The results were also consistent with the fact that teachers have long enjoyed high social status in Taiwan (Chen, 2008). Teachers were regarded as successful and a part of the academic circle, and with high professional status on campus (Tyler and Stokes, 2002). Education, family and sociocultural factors had affected individuals' career interests and career choices (Lent et al., 2010). Financial factors, such as teaching is a much stable job (Chen, 2008) and with stable salary and welfare (Tyler & Stokes, 2002), were also considered by the participants in their decision-making process.

### **Implications and Limitations**

This study's result highlighted the positive opinions of in-service teachers on integrating their teaching and counseling competencies in classroom teaching and teacher-student interactions. Students in the teacher education program should be encouraged to take counseling courses and apply those knowledge, attitude, and skills in their professions. Future studies can discuss ways for teachers to integrate counseling knowledge, attitude, and skills to enhance students' learning process, teacher-student interactions, class management, and student activities. Further research is needed on how the five major considerations derived in the study to form a dynamic mechanism in affecting the career decisions of students with both trainings in education and counseling. Similarly, studies on comparing the teaching and learning effectiveness between teachers with and without counseling competencies, and the decision-making process of school counselors with both competencies should be constructed. Participants in this study were recruited through a snowball method; thus, data collected could be with a high level of homogeneity. Their experiences of career decision-making, therefore, may not reflect those from different types of universities, graduate schools, and/or regions.

### **Conclusion**

The participants of this study recognized the importance of both teaching and counseling in the educational system and the nature of helping students of both professions. They decided to become teachers after serious considerations of profession comparisons, career goals, opinions from the significant others, and characteristics of Taiwan's educational system, socio-culture, and employment environment. They were eager to leverage stronger influence on students, as well as to have power and control on campus, as well as the educational system. With these reasons, they chose to focus on the teaching profession and incorporate counseling competencies to assist the learning and growth of students.

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