

# Have career conversations at an early stage

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Pupils of Orel Vine International school listen to a Uganda People's Defence Forces soldier during their career day recently. The UPDF officer was talking to them about possible careers in the army. PHOTO BY Desire Mbabaali

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By Desire Mbabaali

It had been an entire week of career guidance and counselling at the Gayaza-based Orel Vine International School for learners from Year One to 10, and to crown off the week, all learners were encouraged to dress in imitation of their future career aspirations.

A number of students dressed in white overcoats as doctors, with mock stethoscopes around their necks, about two pupils clad in pilot suits, there is a fire fighter in the other corner, a chef, an artist with colourfully printed pants and a graffiti T-shirt, not to mention a makeup artist with her makeup kit in hand, among others.

This, the teacher explains, is to create both identity and attachment to the children's future aspirations as well as open their minds to a wide range of career options available so as to trigger career conversations between pupils and their parents, as well as their teachers.

"While we were growing up, the most important thing they used to tell us was, 'go study hard, and you will get there. You will be someone!' and that is exactly what we did," Angela

Nambuya, a teacher at Orel Vine International School, reminisces.

However, she realises that this can no longer work effectively in a world where children are exposed to a diversity of dreams.

“We have been having discussions with pupils on how to select a career, the available career paths, after which, we told them to talk to their parents about career options they want to pursue in future because parents are a great influence when it comes to career choices. Their dressing today is a result of the career conversations that happened between the parents and the children,” Agnes Namirimu, a Year Two teacher at the same school, shares.

### **The earlier the better**

It goes without saying that more schools are increasingly appreciating the role of career guidance at the lowest levels of education, and are taking steps in that direction.

“During school holidays, we always organise free career guidance sessions for our learners and sometimes, parents to especially talk about the need for skilling our children. We want the two parties to realise that skills-based career options in vocational and technical fields are also as equally viable as academic-based careers,” Teo Mbabazi, the head teacher, Right Care Primary School, says.

The school does this by inviting career guidance professionals and role models to share expertise and experiences, so as to inspire young learners.

Role models to inspire

Though the career week has been in the history of the school (Orel Vine International) it is parents that have always been invited to talk to the students about their careers. This time around, professionals from across the board were invited. Among these was a doctor, engineer, journalist, army (UPDF soldiers).

### **Why now**

“As a parent living in the ‘now’ it is important that I know what is in the mind of my child when it comes to careers, but also, to help them discover themselves, based on their passions and strengths. After identifying this, I know then how to make them get there,” Rehema Nalwanga Mulindwa says.

She gives an example of her six-year-old daughter who goes to Greenhill Academy, Kibuli whom she enrolled for piano lessons at Kampala Music School during holidays after realising she loved music.

“My attitude is, it is never too early to pursue your dreams. I want that for my child,” she says. Davis Bamukunde, a career guidance counsellor at Inspire Business Consults, shares that when children have a career path they are looking at, it becomes easy for parents, educators and the children themselves to focus or be refocused on their aspirations.

“This has nothing to do with how fancy a career is or sounds, but even if a child’s aspiration is to become a footballer, it is always easy to make them do things that will better them, guide them on which things would be best in enabling them reach where they want to be. Though these career aspirations can change as children grow up, it is better than having a child who has no idea why they are even in school,” he says.

### **Enlightenment**

Having the conversations on career with a child gives one a platform to teach them how the world of work actually works.

“I remember having a student who was very good with Music Dance and Drama but also wanted to become a teacher. In his mind, though he wanted both careers, he thought he only had to choose one of the two. But since we were having this conversation, I got to explain to him that he could actually do both because the world we are living in needs multiple skilled people,” Bamukunde elaborates.

According to a policy paper, Career Guidance: A Hand Book for Policy Makers by the Organisation For Economic Co-Operation And Development, the foundations of career self-management skills (like decision making, self-awareness, self-confidence) are laid at an early age.

“However, career education and guidance in primary schools are limited or non-existent, and little systematic provision is made to explore the world of work. Young people need to make a smooth transition from primary school to the initial years of secondary education,” the paper partly reads.

The paper highlights that some of the challenges are that career education and guidance are often considered to be the sole responsibility of the specialist career guidance staff rather than the joint responsibility of all members of the teaching staff.

In conclusion, there needs to be policies and practice in place to encourage career guidance at lower levels of school and this should be a consorted effort of teachers, parents and the students themselves.

How it is done

Early start. Career development begins in childhood and includes the formal and informal experiences that give rise to talents, interests, values, and knowledge of the world of work, continues into adulthood via the progression of one’s career behaviour such as entry into and adjustment to work throughout lifespan.

Practice. While practising career guidance activities, school counsellors assist children and adolescents explore working environments and give information about working conditions and materials used during working.

Visit workplaces. It is possible to promote career awareness among primary and secondary school children and adolescents by enabling them to visit workplaces and observing the types and process of jobs that workers do in workplaces.

Mentorship. In addition to visiting work places, mentoring can enable children and adolescents to broaden their awareness about job tasks, attitudes, and supports needed to work successfully in any occupation. This way, children who live in rural areas with fewer opportunities may gain early awareness concerning certain specialised careers and can prepare themselves in primary and secondary school for entry into university regarding specialised careers.