AUTHOR:
Jacobus G. Maree[1] iD

AFFILIATION:
[1]Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Jacobus Maree

EMAIL:
kobus.maree@up.ac.za

Rekindling hope and purpose in resource-constrained areas during COVID-19: The merits of counselling for career construction

The COVID-19 pandemic has widened the gap between the career and life chances of learners with sufficient and those with insufficient access to personal and educational resources and structures. This article draws on an adapted, qualitative, systematic literature search to shed light on the effect of the pandemic on learners in resource-constrained areas especially. It discusses the merits of counselling for career construction as an intervention that can bring about transformative change, thereby rekindling learners' sense of hope and purpose. It also reflects on how counselling for career construction can help counsellors and teachers assist learners to deal with inadequate 'mastering of passive suffering' as well as inadequate mastering of developmental tasks during COVID-19. The article concludes with the view that 'hope-, purpose-, and action'-enhancing counselling for self and career counselling can bolster the sense of agency, empowerment, dignity, and self-worth of learners in underprivileged contexts in particular. It is argued that such counselling can promote career adaptability, improve present and future employability, and enhance the meaning-making of disadvantaged South African as well as other African learners.

Significance:

- Disadvantaged learners and the unemployed were more negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than their more privileged counterparts.

- More than 2 years into the COVID-19 pandemic, very little has been reported on the need to bolster the sense of agency, empowerment, dignity, and self-worth of learners in underprivileged contexts in particular.

- The pandemic has amplified the divide between the career-life prospects of learners with sufficient access to educational resources and support and those without such access.

- Steps need to be taken urgently to implement interventions that can bring about transformative change in our schools to rekindle learners' sense of hope and purpose. This will help eliminate existing disparities and improve these learners' work–life future, with positive benefits for the stability and economy of the country.

The pandemic arriving at a particularly challenging time for workers

South Africa, like the rest of the world, faces challenges regarding the future of work. Discourses on the future of work revolve mainly around the unprecedented rate of change in the workplace, which is affecting unskilled and inadequately skilled workers in particular. Millions of jobs are being lost and further job losses are likely as a result of Work 4.0, including threats that robots will increasingly take over jobs formerly done by human beings.[1]

The perceived bleak future of disadvantaged learners

Many authors have argued directly and indirectly that little has changed for the better for learners in South Africa since 1994 and have written about the (perceived) bleak future of school learners and students (the focus of this article).[1-4] Amnesty International states that 'South Africa is failing too many of its young people when it comes to education'[2]. Moreover, year after year, the gap between the career-life prospects of learners with sufficient access to educational resources and those without access to essential resources and support is getting bigger.[2(p.6)] As a result, the so-called 'Matthew effect' is being amplified.[3] The widening education and future job opportunities divide between learners from affluent areas (in public as well as private schools) and those from less affluent areas is concerning.[4] The UNESCO goal of leaving no one behind is at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development but is still far from being realised in South Africa.[5] (It should be stated that references to South African schools etc. can in most cases also be extended to African schools in general.)

Many researchers have expressed concern at the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged learners' academic achievement[6,7] – especially in gateway subjects such as mathematics and physical sciences[8] – and on their longer-term work future. Even before the pandemic, disadvantaged learners were lagging in these subjects. These and other factors can undermine their choice of and performance in a job and a career. The need for career counselling services is at an all-time high, yet only a small percentage of South African learners have access to these (often costly) services. Moreover, although numerous research studies in developed countries in the Global North have shown the value of a more contemporary approach to career counselling[9,10], the outdated 'vocational guidance' ('test-and-tell') model of career counselling still prevails in developing (Global South) countries such as South Africa. Preliminary research reveals that contextualised career construction counselling in individual and group contexts in South Africa and a few other African countries has yielded encouraging outcomes.[8,9,11]

Rationale for the article

Several years ago while colleagues and I were researching the implementation of life orientation classes and the value of a postmodern, storied approach to career counselling in a seriously disadvantaged part of Limpopo Province, I put the following question to learners at the end of the intervention: 'Is there anything else about you that you want to share with me?'[12] A young woman (in Grade 11) responded as follows:

> You asked about, for instance, what are or were our biggest challenges when we were young. When I go home after school, I return to an environment where there is little water and no toilets, where there is dirt everywhere, and where some of us do not even have a bar of soap in our homes without proper windows. How can we be expected to wash our hands after having been to the toilet?

More recently, during a project in a deep rural region, and in response to the same question, another young woman listed 'How to avoid the Corona [sic]' as her current biggest challenge. When probed on her response, she replied: 'There are many different 'stories' about Corona, much uncertainty and confusion. People pay little attention to Corona measures.' (The responses of the participants are verbatim with only light editing in order to preserve their authenticity.) Touched by these two participants' sense of desperation, I later conducted in-depth interviews with them. These and other interviews deepened my compassion for the plight of disadvantaged learners in particular. The interviews also enhanced my understanding of the need to abandon all preconceived ideas when attempting to comprehend the situation of disadvantaged populations.

During the pandemic, many measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus were impracticable in underprivileged contexts (for instance, maintaining social distancing in already overcrowded classrooms and public spaces) and in some instances even contributed to widening the gap between the self- and career construction of advantaged and less advantaged learners. These issues have received little attention in the literature, and the current article represents a modest attempt to contribute to our understanding of the situation.

Goals of the article

It is clear from the above that a paradigm shift is needed to make psychological assessment and intervention accessible to most of the world's population, particularly people in low-resource, multicultural settings.[13] More particularly, a paradigm shift is needed in career construction counselling (namely an approach that enhances learner agency and changes the power relations in the educator/counsellor relationship). Against this background, this article describes an adapted, qualitative, systematic literature search that was aimed at shedding light on the effect of the pandemic on learners in resource-constrained areas in particular. It reflects on how counselling for career construction can help career counsellors and teachers assist learners to deal with inadequate mastering of passive suffering as well as inadequate mastering of developmental tasks during COVID-19. It also discusses the merits of counselling for career construction as an intervention that can bring about transformative change and rekindle learners' sense of hope and purpose.

Approach to the literature review

Adapted qualitative systematic literature review

This article is based on an adapted, qualitative, systematic literature search 'regarding the recent developments and debates on [the topic of this research] with the addition of metacommentary'[14(p.450)]. The aim was to establish a framework for understanding the research topic by uncovering 'gaps between what is known and what is yet to be known'[14(p.462)] about the topic. I was also mindful of Snyder's assertion that the 'literature review as a research method is more relevant than ever'[15(p.333)], provided that such a review is 'accurate, precise, and trustworthy'[15(p.334)]. Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, very little

has been reported on the value of counselling for career construction in rekindling people's sense of hope and purpose. I therefore considered it important to gather as much information on the topic as possible and to identify possible gaps in the theory and practice of the intervention requiring urgent research. With the assistance of Liesl Stieger, academic information specialist (Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria), the following four broad literature review steps were followed[14]:

1. Clearly define the study goals.

2. Establish inclusion and exclusion criteria. *Inclusion criteria* comprised sources that illuminated the topic of the study, contained more information than merely personal views, and enhanced the literature review. *Exclusion criteria* comprised sources that were biased or merely personal opinions, did not relate sufficiently to our knowledge on the topic, and were outdated. However, we acknowledged the value of seminal citations in promoting academic thoroughness.

3. Select literature to review based on the above criteria. We were aware of the limitations of Internet-based sources and other non-peer-reviewed sources. However, given the short period of time since the advent of the pandemic, we were obliged to draw on several such sources to achieve a satisfactory degree of data saturation. We of course also selected 'standard' sources such as books, articles, and online sources such as social media (including magazines, Internet forums, and social blogs/vlogs). Likewise, we searched and selected sources from YouTube, podcasts, webinars, LinkedIn, Academia, and ResearchGate.

4. Peruse and synthesise (integrate) the relevant sources.[16,17] Ms Stieger used combinations of the following keywords as search terms: 'Career construction', 'Counselling', 'Covid-19', 'purpose', 'resource-constrained', and 'therapy'.

We followed the data-gathering method described below.[14]

i. We searched the web for article abstracts in numerous databases to gather a wide range of relevant sources.

ii. We signed up to many Internet publishing entities for information on the research topic (Rekindling hope and purpose in resource-constrained areas during COVID-19: The merit of counselling for career construction).

iii. We cleared inappropriate sources that did not shed light on the topic. We then either downloaded or requested full texts of appropriate sources.

iv. We assessed the value and relevance of the identified sources, which were then scrutinised to establish whether they contributed to our understanding of the research topic and whether they shed light on existing views on the topic.

Bearing in mind the discussion in the introductory part of this article, it is not surprising that the literature review confirmed the general view that disadvantaged learners and the unemployed have been more negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than their more privileged counterparts.[18-20] In the next section, I reflect on the effect of the pandemic on learners in resource-constrained areas. The categories listed and discussed were gleaned from the systematic literature review and from my own interpretation of the texts. The categorisation of topics was structured in the following order[17]: microlevel-related issues followed by a number of mesolevel-related issues and then macro-level-related issues, including structural constraints.

Microlevel-related issues

It is not sufficient to focus only on the effects of the pandemic on learners' academic achievements. Even before the pandemic, most disadvantaged learners lacked the support structures needed to develop emotionally-socially, physically, spiritually, and in terms of well-being and resilience. They were (and still are) taught in overcrowded classrooms and did not have access to basic necessities such as food, running water, shelter,

and proper sanitation. Many did not attend classes at all or attended classes only every second day or week, resulting in, among other things, deficient socialising. Disadvantaged learners in particular also struggled to make the transition to online teaching and learning. Learners not living with either parent, learners from single-parent families, learners from child-headed families, and learners experiencing learning barriers were particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

Many authors have referred to the negative impact of the above factors on disadvantaged learners' academic achievement (self-actualisation). Their well-being and development in general, their emotional and spiritual well-being, and their socialising skills are even more critical in determining their academic success.[18-20,21]

Mesolevel-related issues

Teaching by poorly trained teachers (in mathematics, physical sciences, and English especially) impacts negatively on disadvantaged learners' chances of realising their potential, as it undermines their self- and career construction.[22] The pandemic (together with these learners' feelings of insecurity and alienation and teacher inadequacy in adjusting to a different modality of teaching and learning) has deepened the divide between the quality of teaching and learning in privileged and underprivileged schools.[23] Online teaching and learning is often experienced as bewildering, frustrating, and alienating by disadvantaged learners who have to adapt to online teaching and learning in conditions not conducive to such teaching and learning. Inadequate and unreliable Internet access in poor areas further compromises online teaching and learning. Privileged schools are generally closer to reliable Internet service providers and have the funds to pay for Internet access and better-trained teachers. Many disadvantaged learners feel disempowered and simply resign themselves to the inconvenience and hardship brought about by the pandemic. Many believe also that 'fate' or 'luck' determines what happens to them (share an external locus of control). Even before the pandemic, disadvantaged learners' sense of well-being and meaning-making was undermined by their circumstances.[24] Their lived experiences heightened their belief that not even hard work and commitment could help them escape the 'poverty trap' they found themselves in. This situation cannot be reconciled with the Convention on the Rights of the Child[2,25] and is unacceptable in a postmodern world.

Macrolevel-related issues[26]

Much has been written about the structural constraints (including structural inequalities and lack of support structures) in disadvantaged areas in South Africa (one of the most unequal countries in the world).[4,5,17,18,21,26] Learners from township and rural areas especially tend to be members of low-income families and live in resource-constrained environments. National and provincial education departments have done their best to minimise the adverse effect of the pandemic on teaching and learning and to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning in the face of increasing challenges. However, major structural constraints in low socio-economic areas have undermined efforts to prevent disadvantaged learners from falling further behind their more affluent counterparts.

Large numbers of disadvantaged learners have lost hope, have disengaged from the teaching and learning process, and have dropped out of school.[21] Although these learners often project a sense of hopelessness and defeatism, they have no one to turn to for guidance and counselling. The pandemic has heightened the need for general and career counselling especially in disadvantaged schools in low-economic status areas.[27,28] The need to facilitate change and transformation in teaching and learning has never been greater.

Inadequate management of learners' career counselling needs

Disadvantaged learners' career guidance, development, and counselling needs are not being met satisfactorily.[29,30] The few learners who do receive career counselling are rarely exposed to contemporary career counselling. Their subjective 'career-life stories' are generally neither elicited satisfactorily nor integrated with the outcomes of 'objective'

tests completed by them. The pandemic has exacerbated this situation too as most teachers in disadvantaged areas lack the skills to provide online career guidance or simply do not have the time to devote to career guidance. Pillay[31] advocates the contextualisation and innovation of individual and group career counselling so that all learners can receive counselling. The focus should be on learners' strengths rather than on their areas for growth or development ('weaknesses'). The aim should ultimately be to enhance their personal, physical, emotional-social, and spiritual well-being and resilience.

It is particularly concerning that learners' mastery of critical development tasks has been seriously negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Learners' inadequate mastering of critical developmental tasks

The pandemic has hampered the ability of many disadvantaged learners to master basic developmental tasks. It has also led to isolation from their peers, inadequate expression of their emotions, inadequate normalisation of their experiences, and insufficient participation in sport and social events. Many learners have been so traumatised by the pandemic that they may experience post-traumatic stress for many years to come.

Erikson emphasises the importance of children's mastering critical developmental tasks during the following five stages of their development[32]:

1. First stage (1–2 years; essential trust contrasted with mistrust). Infants may develop anxiety if their care and trust needs are not addressed, which may lead to their distrusting other people.

2. Second stage (2–4 years; autonomy contrasted with shame and doubt). Infants become more independent and develop a will of their own provided they achieve a good sense of self and an adequate degree of personal control over their over physical proficiencies.

3. Third stage (4–5 years; initiative contrasted with guilt). Young children often develop a sufficient level of resolve to accomplish goals and acquire a sense of direction in their lives provided they are allowed to attempt to complete specified tasks on their own successfully (explore their capabilities).

4. Fourth stage (5–12 years; industry contrasted with inferiority). Young children often try to develop new proficiencies and gradually become more competent and able to execute more complicated tasks. Their chances of achieving a satisfactory level of self-worth and self-belief are increased if significant others acknowledge and reward their efforts appropriately and encourage them further.

5. Fifth stage (13–18 years; identity contrasted with role confusion). Significant others' constant support and reassurance are vital in helping teenagers develop a sufficient sense of identity (discover who they are). During this stage, they gradually become more independent of significant others provided the significant others give them sufficient opportunity to take on and complete tasks that are increasingly challenging.

Erikson's[32] views are strongly aligned with developmental psychology theories (Piaget[33]) as well as perspectives that emphasise the importance of integrating new knowledge into existing schemata. They are also in line with the (constructivist) view that idiosyncratic (individual) (self-) constructions do not occur in a void but are constructed in the context of interpersonal and social relationships as well as social systems. A reciprocal relationship exists between such systems and how individuals 'make meaning'.

Erikson[32], Freud[34], and Savickas[35,36] agree that the inability to master age-appropriate assignments is likely to result in the repeated re-emergence of these tasks later in life as a kind of pathology. Pain that has been 'suffered' earlier in learners' lives and/or age-appropriate assignments that have not been mastered adequately should be dealt with to ensure psychologically healthy development in learners. If these issues are not properly resolved, learners may re-experience the pain or the frustration

at not having mastered the assignments.[34] The findings of the literature overview (discussed above) indicate clearly the devastating effect of the pandemic on learners' mastery of multiple critical developmental tasks across the board. Timely intervention is needed to prevent, or at least ameliorate, the consequences of the pandemic in this regard.

Short-, medium-, and long-term implications of the pandemic

The primary focus of education stakeholders during the past 24 months has been on finding ways to deal with the short-term impact of the pandemic (such as deciding on and implementing measures to curb the spread of the virus and maintain a satisfactory level of teaching and learning). The medium-term impact has also received attention (such as ensuring that learners' knowledge base, academic achievement, and emotional-social well-being are not unduly compromised). The long-term impact of unmastered developmental tasks and 'pain' experienced earlier in learners' lives, as discussed above, is of particular importance. Many of the effects of the pandemic may manifest pathologically later in life. Psychologists working with school learners and students at tertiary level will require training on how to deal effectively with psychological challenges as and when they occur. Parents and guardians will also require training on how to promote the mastery of basic developmental tasks in their children.

In the next section I reflect on how to rekindle both disadvantaged and other learners' sense of hope and purpose in the current challenging times. I do this through the lens of counselling for career construction as an example of an intervention that holds considerable promise for transformative change.

Clarifying learners' career-life identity

From an early age, people seek to know who they are, where they fit in[37], how to achieve good academic and sports results, what direction to take in their future careers, find a 'job', provide for themselves and their families, and live meaningful lives – a never-ending, existential search. According to Flanagan et al., '[y]oung people's work and life roles are not siloed from one another; they require a multi-dimensional, whole-person approach to support'[38(p.27)]. The extent to which teachers can help learners clarify their career-life identity, improve their sense of self-respect and dignity (essential elements of psychological health), and appreciate the overlap between their personal and career life roles is important in assessing the success of the learning process (in addition to quantitative measures such as learners' scores in tests and examinations).

In the next section, I draw on the work of Savickas[35,36] and others to propose a theory-based strategy aimed at helping learners elicit their life themes and enact them in their career-lives and also at helping them actively master what they have passively endured to clarify their career-life identities. In this regard, I look at the pandemic as a way of creating opportunities. I agree with Kift et al. who maintain that '[c]rises can present opportunities for transformative change'[39(p.27)]. Discussions on the pandemic should shift from stressing the magnitude of challenges to using a 'positive career counselling' approach to find innovative solutions to these challenges. I elaborate below on how counselling for career construction can help meet the career counselling needs of disadvantaged learners in particular. I discuss also the value of building on the strengths of such counselling to achieve the kind of transformative change referred to above, to help these learners deal with the traumatisation of the pandemic[40], and to restore their sense of agency, empowerment, dignity, self-respect, and purpose.

Contextualised and innovative career counselling for disadvantaged learners

Dealing with the impact of the pandemic calls for introspection, reflection, open-mindedness, and a 'radical' reassessment of current thinking about career counselling in South African schools. These schools, in general, do not meet the distinctive career counselling needs of disadvantaged learners[41] or their existential needs. Disadvantaged

learners' prospects of finding work are diminishing as are their chances of later remaining in one organisation for a long period of time. Yet, most of them (if they do at all receive career counselling) are 'told' what to become by career counsellors operating from the traditional vocational guidance ('test-and-tell') perspective. This approach has been described as unidirectional (non-dialogic), prescriptive, and non-responsive to contextual circumstances.[9,37] Drawing on this approach, career counsellors (who are considered 'the experts' on their assessees) 'tell' or advise assessees which fields of study, associated careers, and work environments would best 'match' or 'fit' their personalities. It was also believed that people could choose careers in which they could remain for a lifetime. In these careers, they could actualise (realise) or develop their (objectively assessed) potential optimally, be promoted regularly, and steadily climb the corporate ladder.[30] Most (disadvantaged) learners are interested merely in finding 'a job' that will help them either 'survive' or augment the income of their family. They are rarely confronted with the notion of being able to choose and construct a career and design themselves. Innovative, contextualised career construction counselling seems to be an idea whose time has come. Maree and Beck[42] have shown how much disadvantaged learners can benefit from being allowed to express themselves and narrate their micro-stories instead of being compelled to merely select responses from given sets of possible answers. Expressing themselves helps them establish a sense of control in their career-related decisions.

A postmodern, integrated qualitative-quantitative career counselling approach differs widely from the outdated one-job-in-a-lifetime approach. Narrating one's micro-stories is central to acquiring a stable sense of self and identity – key elements that will sustain people's stories in traumatic times. Career counsellors should be trained to listen *for* (rather than *to*) learners' life stories[43] as this will better enable them to help learners clarify, not only what field of study and associated career to go into, but also the 'deeper' meaning of their lives – such as who they essentially are and why they are here[44].

Although the theoretical framework of the intervention approach advocated here is counselling for career construction, career construction theory is closely linked to self-construction theory, which is discussed briefly below.

Self-construction theory

According to Guichard[45], the basic premise of self-construction theory is that learners take the initiative in constructing themselves through their interpersonal relationships. Self-construction theory holds that learners 'make meaning' through numerous small, medium, and long-term communications and by drawing on their memories – inspired in the process by their anticipated futures. By executing different private and career-related roles, learners develop, grow, communicate with others, and demonstrate a broad array of attitudes and behaviours. Over time, doing so helps them construct (as opposed to 'find') a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Ultimately, this trajectory helps them clarify their sense of identity (clarify who they are).

Career construction theory

The rapidly changing world of work and the global economy impose challenges regarding the appropriate selection of careers, necessitating a more contemporary, blended theoretical approach to career counselling. Career construction theory, according to Savickas[35,36], merges three career counselling approaches. First, the differential approach focuses on individual differences and fitting people to 'appropriate' work environments. Second, the developmental approach focuses on the different roles people fulfil in different life stages and how they develop careers by examining their readiness for different positions in organisations. Third, the psychodynamic (narrative, qualitative or storied) approach focuses on uncovering central life patterns, themes, and meaning for individuals in their emerging life stories and experiences.[35] Career construction theory has four facets: construction (narrating life stories), deconstruction (unpacking the meaning of these stories), reconstruction (transforming painful stories), and co-

construction (constructive co-authoring of people's stories by career counsellors and their clients).[35,36]

Career construction theory advances the idea of the self as people's internal, inspiring polestar that is drawn on to navigate career-life transitions. This approach is suited to identifying disadvantaged learners and to helping them elicit advice from within regarding critical career and personal life questions. Its primary point of departure is that every story starts with pain. Career construction intervention helps counsellors elicit clients' micro- life stories, which are then woven into a consistent macro-story. It focuses on the subjective facets of clients' personalities, on clients' uniqueness instead of their similarity, on clients' life themes rather than their interest patterns in isolation, and on action and forward movement.[35] Clients engage actively in authoring their life stories to help them find meaning and purpose in what they do, the core aim of life design.[35-46]

Narratability and autobiographicity

Counsellors provide clients with a safe ('sacred') space or holding environment[35-47] and thus promote the narration and connecting of their micro-stories to allow their central life themes to emerge (narratability). Autobiographicity is facilitated in this way. In other words, clients are provided with scripts (their autobiographies) consisting of proven success recipes ('blueprints') containing inner advice for finding answers to important personal and career-related questions and possible future challenges when they have to navigate transitions in the workplace. Narratability and autobiographicity help people take advantage of change[35] and move forward actively (actionality).[48] Narratability and autobiographicity also increase people's adaptability (help them adapt to ongoing workplace changes) and their employability (help them become more employable).[49]

The healing potential of enacting life themes

Life themes relate to unresolved personal trauma experienced by people earlier in their lives (and at work) and to unmastered developmental tasks.[32,33,50] Resolving such trauma and unmastered tasks is essential for people to deal successfully with occupational and personal transitions in today's ever-changing workplace. Counsellors engaged in assisting people in resolving unresolved trauma and mastering unmastered developmental tasks contend that eliciting and using life themes can help people clarify who they are, where they are heading, and the purpose of their lives. However, career counsellors rarely undertake such elicitation and use of life themes as many erroneously believe the strategy is too complex and challenging.

Drawing on counselling for career construction, I conceptualised and devised two novel career-counselling assessment instruments to facilitate the administration of contextualised, integrative QUALITATIVE-quantitative (uppercase indicating the priority accorded the qualitative paradigm) career construction intervention in individual and group contexts.[8]

Integrative QUALITATIVE-quantitative career construction counselling

This approach elicits and can be used to merge people's 'stories' (qualitative data) with their 'objective' (quantitative data) scores in tests. There is currently global acceptance of the importance of bringing into play people's uniqueness and sense of identity rather than emphasising the similarity between their 'test profiles' and the test profiles of others.[51] Uncovering and helping people perform their key life themes is prioritised over merely trying to elicit and use their interest patterns during the career-counselling process. Also prioritised is assisting people in enacting their career-related intentions and moving forward (transforming 'tension' into not only 'intention' but into real action).[35,36,52] From an 'active mastering of passive suffering' point of view, the integrative approach sees unmastered developmental tasks also as life themes that need to be uncovered and enacted in people's lives. These themes should then be channelled into the healing of others and the self. Integrating stories and scores culminates in enabling people to develop their mission statements in conjunction with vision statements.

Developing mission statements in conjunction with vision statements

Integrative career counselling concludes by crafting assessees' mission statements in conjunction with vision statements. First, assessees are requested to draw on their responses to questions asked during the career construction intervention to craft a sentence (an identity, value, or power statement) that merges their strengths and areas for growth into one value, power, or identity sentence that conveys their distinctiveness.[35,36,52] This is followed by extracting appropriate words and phrases from their reflections on questions asked during the intervention to complete a merged sentence that captures the spirit of their unique (career-)life story narrative. This sentence should reflect their future career-life intentions and connect to their so-called character arc and also briefly connect the beginning of a critical theme, its current status, and the envisaged end to the solution of a personal 'issue'. The sentence should shed light on what assessees want to achieve in their careers to experience personal meaning [mission statement]. It should also speak to how they wish to convert personal issues into social contributions and, at the same time, experience a sense of fulfilment, purpose, and hope in their (career-)lives [vision statement]. While counsellors serve as 'editors' of these statements or narratives, assessees themselves craft these statements and draw on inner advice for key 'ideas', wisdom, and advice. Subsequently, short-, medium-, and longer-term goals (in line with assessees' central purpose) aimed at enacting these statements are set and seen through to enactment by regularly following up on assessees' progress.

Value of the integrative approach

This article supports Laher's view that a paradigm shift is necessary for psychological assessment (and intervention) to be accessible to people throughout the world[13] – in particular people with low socio-economic status and minimal education and career counselling resources. Laher et al. describe the integrative approach outlined in this article as 'interesting also in [its] diverse applications of narrative research that do not necessarily conform to the method as explicated in methods textbooks'[16(p.11)]. These authors believe that this style of intervention and the associated research provide an 'excellent example of socially relevant research in contexts of practice'.[16(p.11)] It is an approach that yields excellent results in primary, secondary, and tertiary education and enables learners to examine, choose, and execute careers that can help them live purposeful lives.

Limitations

The views expressed in this article are mine alone and fill only a tiny part of the larger intellectual jigsaw puzzle. They may also have been influenced by my particular interest in teaching and learning at various educational levels in general and in disadvantaged areas in particular. Also, because of the relative recentness of the pandemic, we were able to find only a few scholarly publications on the research topic against which to measure my ideas and opinions.

Recommendations and implications for theory, practice, future research, and policy

The pandemic necessitated deep reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning in all teaching and learning contexts in South Africa.[17,53] What is needed is the revamping of teaching and learning strategies at all levels of education in tandem with the training and upskilling of teachers and lecturers to ensure that all learners have access to effective education and career counselling.[2] Particular emphasis should be placed on disadvantaged schools where the need is greatest. First, stakeholders (including teachers, education departments, learners, and their parents) should finalise and agree upon a valid, long-term, contextualised (qualitative) career development/construction intervention strategy. Second, life orientation teachers should be trained to administer qualitative career development/construction to learners under the supervision of psychologists. In addition to training in the fundamental aspects of adapted and contextualised career construction counselling, the training should include basic instruction in the theory

of psychosocial development. Ethical boundaries should be maintained at all levels, including referring learners to other health professionals when they present with problems outside teachers' scope of practice. Third, teachers should receive training in cross-cultural interaction and communication. Fourth, life orientation learning programmes should be revamped by replacing dispensable content with contemporary content (see below for more details) that has been shown to enhance people's 'thriving skills'. Fifth, short-, medium-, and long-term research on the value of this kind of training should be conducted and reported on in local and international scholarly journals. Sixth, additional time should be allocated to life orientation intervention in schools to allow teachers sufficient time to properly execute the intervention advocated here. Seventh, ongoing monitoring of learners' progress should be undertaken to increase the success of interventions. Learners should regularly be informed about available strategies if they experience difficulties with different aspects of their studies (including emotional and social issues). Here, I refer to, for instance, help with their study orientation, help with the provision of general, psycho-educational, and psychosocial information, help with career counselling, and help with digital learning issues. Lastly, a lot of time needs to be invested in these endeavours – there are no 'quick fixes', and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach will also not work).[54,55]

These recommendations should be read in conjunction with general recommendations for the improvement of teaching and learning in marginalised, disadvantaged areas in particular. Many of these recommendations have been referred to directly or indirectly in earlier publications.[18,41] One such recommendation is that libraries and well-resourced technology-enhanced learning centres with adequate connectivity should be established in disadvantaged areas especially to enable vulnerable (at-risk) learners to upgrade their skills base and improve their chances of success in their tertiary studies.[56] Lastly, whereas the above recommendations stress the time and effort needed to implement the recommendations, much time and effort will also be needed to design the learning-oriented programmes discussed earlier.

Conclusion

Steps need to be taken urgently to counter the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged learners' teaching and learning and to meet their career counselling needs. This will help eliminate existing disparities and improve these learners' work–life future, with positive benefits for the stability and economy of the country.[57]

The implementation in South African schools of the integrative 'hope-, purpose-, and action-'enhancing career counselling strategy discussed in this article could go a long way towards bolstering the sense of agency, empowerment, dignity, and self-worth of learners in underprivileged contexts in particular. It could also promote the career adaptability, the present and future employability, and the meaning-making of these learners.

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Competing interests

I have no competing interests to declare.

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