

Changing the approach to career counselling in a disadvantaged context: a case study¹

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During previous research we discovered that the facilitation of career counselling, in particular, was almost totally absent in many schools in South Africa. Research on the identification of appropriate assessment instruments for career counselling in diverse South Africa needs to be broadened considerably. The project described here addresses the need to cross the divide between a status quo of no assessment in South African schools and the exclusive use of tests by psychologists in this context, and provides researchers with much-needed information to empower teachers in schools to offer viable career counselling to learners. A career counselling strategy is being developed for all learners in South Africa, including even the traditionally most disadvantaged, and the focus on career counselling internationally is being implemented locally.

There is a dire need to facilitate career counselling for learners in South Africa, especially in schools in previously disadvantaged regions, where this facility is virtually non-existent. There is no need to remind readers of the crying need of so many learners, even those who have passed Year 2, who have no vital lifelong skills and almost no business acumen. Despite the sustained efforts of lawmakers and those who implement policy, the South African occupational landscape is still characterised by a number of gross imbalances and unemployment is rife, estimated at up to 46% (J.D. Jansen, personal communication, 2005). The following statistics (S. Shan, personal communication, 2003) indicate the extent to which South African career patterns have been skewed by factors such as our apartheid past and the inadequate career counselling received by blacks. (Note: The terms 'black', 'coloured' and 'Indian', which reflect an artificial way of distinguishing people racially and ethnically, are used in this context in order to highlight inequities in the South African population that should be rectified.) South Africa's population is 45.9 million, of whom 37.6 million persons are black, 4.3 million white, 4 million coloured and 1.1 million Indian. Statistics show that 337 out of a total of 21,422 accountants, 347 out of a total of 14,687 engineers, 3 out of a total of 4,024 dentists and 12 out of a total of 497 actuaries are black. Yet even in 2007 career counselling in South Africa is available primarily to people who are able to afford this expensive service, thus further disadvantaging many already impoverished non-white populations. This highlights the need to: (a) improve the quality of career counselling in schools where this facility is available; (b) to initiate this service in the myriad of schools where this type of service is not offered currently; (c) empower disadvantaged youths to become qualified

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and motivated professionals; (d) contribute to the positive transformation of South African society; and (e) enrich and diversify the culture of counselling at training institutions throughout South Africa.

Previous Research

During previous research we discovered that the facilitation of career counselling, in particular, was almost totally absent in all the schools involved in the research project (and, in fact, in the entire region), despite the fact that the South African government has identified the implementation of a life orientation program in primary and secondary schools as a key element of learners' education (as an aside, curiously, education departments have virtually done away with the use of tests' in the learning context).

All principals of schools where research was conducted submitted requests to the researchers to facilitate a career counselling process for the learners in South Africa as a matter of extreme urgency. This should be read against the backdrop of the following quotation from the acclaimed Cosser Report, which is exactly the case in South Africa:

Career guidance in whatever form ... has a positive effect on intention to enter HE [higher education] ... The implications for policy are that the Department of Education should increase its support for career counselling initiatives in schools--particularly where learners are not in a position, or feel themselves unable, to discuss their future plans with parents or guardians ... This would involve ... establishing the service of schools which have no such tradition (Cosser, 2002, p. 93).

Brief Epistemological Background

Research on the identification of appropriate assessment instruments for career counselling in a diverse context in South Africa (and, indeed, Africa in general) is in its infancy and needs to be broadened considerably. Current career counselling strategies rely mainly on the results of psychometric tests, despite the glaring shortcomings of the traditional approach to career counselling, which have become apparent in postmodern, post-apartheid South Africa. These shortcomings include the following: (a) counsellors who implement current career counselling models rely mainly on the results of profiles of psychometric tests; (b) few psychometric tests have been specifically designed for South Africa's multicultural population; (c) the vast majority of American and European tests currently in use in South Africa are not necessarily valid and reliable for the diverse South African cultures; (d) the value of the test results is often exaggerated and the career counsellor is regarded as an expert whose recommendations should be accepted unconditionally, often resulting in the learner being excluded from the decision-making process; (e) the client often avoids the responsibility of making his or her own choices regarding a future career and there is little proof of exploration and development of the self by the client; (f) clients are often deprived of the opportunity to explore and develop because tests are seldom interpreted in a dynamic manner; (g) the vast majority of testees

are not well versed in English, the main language of learning and teaching.

Career counselling from a postmodern, narrative perspective requires reconsidering the traditional (modern) approach of the 20th century. An approach is needed to provide us with the means to answer the following career-counselling questions: How would this approach be useful to a man who has been sentenced to spend the rest of his days in prison; or someone who consumes a bottle of gin a day and lives on the streets; or a gang member in an urban ghetto; or a single mother with four children living in abject poverty?' (Winslade, 2007, p.52). In South Africa, there is an urgent need for an approach that attempts to: (a) facilitate an understanding of individual and collective strengths and barriers in career development; (b) assist clients to utilise strengths and negotiate barriers in order to facilitate wellbeing (happiness) by mobilising existing resources; (c) enhance assessment (and employment!) opportunities for learners; (d) help learners negotiate major life transitions (e.g., choosing a career at the end of their Year 12 year); (e) assist learners taking their first steps in career pathing; (f) administer viable, affordable career counselling to all learners; and (g) link life stories and career choices.

The general aim of narrative career counselling is to script a person's own life story. This focus makes the approach uniquely suited for an exploration of personal meanings and for helping resolve many kinds of problems involving meaning. In attempting to facilitate career development, a narrative approach attempts to effect personal agency, by viewing learners as active agents in their personal development and cultivating an increased emphasis on emotions and passions.

Whereas Kidd (1998) noted that the major distinction between a traditional and a more subjective approach lies in the increased emphasis that the latter places on clients' purposes, emotions and passions, McMahon and Patton (2002) emphasise that both approaches have a rightful place in the process of career development. We concur with the latter view, which is why, in our research, we attempt to meld these two approaches in a meaningful way in order to enable us to devise a career counselling strategy that could set a trend that might provide all our provincial Departments of Education with a road map for the future. Our projects constitute a pioneering effort to exert a positive impact on the lives of millions of people in South Africa.

The Case Study

Research aims

This project addresses the need to cross the divide between a status quo of no assessment in the school context being allowed and the exclusive use of tests by psychologists in this context. Furthermore, it attempts to facilitate an understanding of the above-mentioned issues and provide the researchers with much-needed information to empower teachers in

schools to offer viable career counselling to learners. To this end we also aim to facilitate a few teachers' understanding and acquisition of a postmodern, narrative approach to career counselling to enable South Africa to benefit from such research conducted throughout the world, thereby contributing towards a framework for career counselling that could be used to develop the broader landscape of counselling, empowerment and affirmation as key ingredients for achieving genuine transformation of counsellors, teachers and teaching. As in any intervention strategy, we strive to treat the individual and his or her environment holistically; therefore it is essential to provide the general research context in South Africa. Even though we conduct research throughout South Africa, for the purpose of this article, we will focus primarily on research conducted on disadvantaged populations; simply because very little has been reported on research conducted on these populations. In the following section, we elaborate on ongoing research in four South African provinces.

Research method

The project team is, in a sense, conducting action research, that is, it is tackling typical problems experienced in South African classrooms in cycles, attempting to solve these problems and applying what it learnt in the course of previous sessions in subsequent cycles. It has to be reiterated that the extremely impoverished contexts of the schools in the research sample are not conducive to optimal career development facilitation and are not the contexts in which career facilitation has been successful in the recent past. Nonetheless the project team is building on small successes, believing that a step-by-step approach presents the best chance of achieving ultimate success.

Ethical considerations

Written permission was obtained from the education authorities as well as from the principals of the schools to allow learners in their schools to participate. Written permission was sought and obtained from the parents or guardians and the learners who participated. Assurance was given that no individual would be identified. For the purpose of confidentiality, all information that could identify an individual was carefully disguised or omitted so that neither our participants nor those who know these participants would be identifiable. Ethical measures to ensure the research participants' well-being were implemented throughout the study.

Research design

We carried out research from 2003 to 2006 on ways in which to propose innovative career-counselling methods. When we designed our research, we wanted to discover whether it was possible, working with learners, to trace the impact of meaning-making, writing life stories and applying lifestyle and biographical analysis to learners, and to link

these acts with the world of work, so that their enthusiasm increased and they became ready to make career choices. We worked with 1,200 learners in Years 9 and in 13 schools in four South African provinces (Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West). Some of these schools were in the remotest regions of the country (e.g., schools in the Makhado region of the Limpopo province are some 480km north of Pretoria). We gathered background data on the learners and visited the schools once every two months for two years.

During the first two years of the project, half the schools and learners were in a control group and half were in the experimental group. We facilitated traditional career counselling to the learners in the control group, but we facilitated postmodern career counselling to encourage and support the learners in the experimental group to choose careers based on a narrative approach, hypothesising that if this succeeded, their career choices would be greatly enhanced. Subsequently, however, we altered our mode of inquiry from quantitative-qualitative to qualitative and dropped the idea of a control group, simply because we felt that there was little need to compare two approaches to career counselling. Instead we opted to combine the two approaches in a meaningful way.

Assessment was practical, hands-on and interactive, thus equipping learners to apply workshop principles in their lives. Role playing (during which the focus is on simulating real-life situations) was introduced at schools and yielded promising results. The team focused on the following assessment techniques: collages, life stories, informal assessment techniques, the Career Interest Profile (Maree, 2005), the South African Vocational Interest Inventory (Du Toit, 1992), the Rothwell-Miller Interest Blank (Hall, Halstead & Taylor, 1986), life and career style questions (Hartung, 2007; Savickas, 1993, 2006, 2007), Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth version (Bar-On & Parker, 2000), life chapters and life line (Cochran, 1997). Due to lack of space, we will focus only on an analysis of some excerpts from learners' life stories.

Narratives

Learners were requested to start writing their life stories and to reflect on their experiences during the first few sessions. The verbatim excerpts have been arranged and grouped thematically. Analysis of the interviews, however, suggests that the overriding message in them can best be summed up in the following words, expressed by an 8-year-old male: How can you smile when you don't have any hope?'

Learner A (18-year-old female): *When life hurts*

Life has always been hard, especially these days. I have seen more pain in my life than is good for anyone my age. I have seen mothers being raped, I have had to run for my life, I have had to beat of rapists ... yes, life has never been a bed of roses. Very few people

seem to care; I don't have anyone that I can trust or talk to.

Learner B (20-year-old male): *Life is hard*

Growing up as an orphan

Living with my grandparents

A new day dawns: starting school

Making major mistakes in my life

God helps me to learn from my mistakes

Please will you help me to choose the right' career; one that will help me to work towards a bright future? More particularly, I need help with certain subjects that are difficult, e.g. Life Sciences, Physical Sciences and Mathematics so I can achieve better to help me qualify for university.

Learner C (17-year-old male): *Ukuphila ngaphandle kwabazali (I have no one in my life)*

This life is hard

I have no siblings or relatives

Finally: without any roof over my head

Seems as if everyone has now left me

Dear Sir

I am a top achiever, yet, I would love to achieve even better. If possible, I want to achieve some distinctions at the end of Year 12. Furthermore, help me to manage my feelings of anger and frustration. I live in a most difficult environment, where the PHD (pull him down') syndrome is rife. People hate it when others achieve better than they do. Please help me to deal with these problems?

Learner D (16-year-old female): *Impilo inzima ngaphandle kwabaholi (Life is tough without anyone who cares)*

Dear Sir

It is good to work with someone who is not rejecting, but instead accepts me for who I am. It is good to be assessed, knowing that you will be helping me to identify and focus on a possible career. However, I still need much more information so I can become surer of what it is that I want to do with my life. In addition, please can you show me how to manage my time properly, especially since I seem not to take in what I am studying, even though I am a hard worker who studies every day. How do I manage to get a bursary? My guardians cannot afford to send me to university.

Learner E (19-year-old female): *Life of a drifter*

Misfortune haunts me

Why do I consistently do the wrong things in life?

I need a friend and I need to be loved

Dreary life without even the most basic facilities

Almost all my classmates are desperately despondent, suffering from low self-esteem.

Help us to start believing in ourselves again, to focus on the bright and positive side of things again?

Learner F (18-year-old female): *Why is life like this?*

Everything seems to be disintegrating

Why is life so difficult?

Doomed from the start I keep on failing: Finding it hard to deal with my emotions

Please sir, help me to become successful in future and be a role model to other people. I want to make a difference in the lives of others. Thank you.

Learner G (21-year-old male): *My dreams*

Dear Sir

Please come again to our school. It was nice to meet/be with you.

Please, when you come again, bring career information along, so you can help us to choose suitable careers. Help ME to rewrite the story of my life!

Thank you, and don't worry if the children don't seem to care.

Ungalahli ithemba, inkosi ikubusise kakhulu. (God will bless you.)

Sir, help us make our dreams come true. Help me find a career that I can pursue to help me stop crime and promote peace in our country.

Learner H (19-year-old male): *Life of a gangster*

There are so many criminals!

I end up being a criminal myself. I start drinking and clashing with the law

At last ... saved from being a criminal!

Sir, I need to talk with you if you can find some time.

Learner I (19-year-old female): *Inhlupheko yamalanga wonke (Everyday struggle)*

What life is like in a slum

I, too, want to achieve something in life

Going without parents, food and drink

Please sir, talk with us about the many difficulties we face every day of our lives. Where can we find help, seeing that we don't have access to counseling services? Please may I explain my situation to you personally?

Discussion

Identified themes

Data were analysed on the basis of an adaptation of Tesch's method (cited in Creswell, 1994) that involved reading through the narratives; making a list of topics that emerged; returning to the data; finding the most descriptive wording for the topics and turning them into categories, and grouping together related topics; alphabetising codes; preliminary analysis; and recoding, if necessary. Data were also analysed using Morse and Field's approach of comprehending, synthesising, theorising and recontextualising (Morse, 1994; Morse & Field, 1996).

Thematic analysis of these and other narratives yielded rather revealing themes, not indicative of well-being (see Table 1 at end of article).

Other difficulties encountered by students

Clearly the vast majority of learners experience problems with English, the language of learning and teaching, and have very limited exposure to fields of study. As a result, they find it extremely hard, not only to express themselves adequately, but also to understand the language of the assessment instruments. Few learners achieve well enough to qualify for university entrance, especially in sought-after fields of study. Most of those that do qualify fail to find sufficient funding to support them through university.

Changing focus

The project team's initial emphasis was on learners. We soon realised, however, that facilitating teachers' understanding and acquisition of a storied approach to career counselling was essential if we were to make any significant impact on adolescents' career development in our schools, for which reason teachers, parents, psychologists and other health professionals involved with learners are being involved increasingly to bring about a joint strategy. For example, in the Sekhukhuneland region of South Africa, at the

Seroka Clinic, the project team recently launched a vegetable garden project, which is directly linked to the career-counselling project.

Facilitating valid and trustworthy counselling in a diverse setting

Some measures taken to enhance quality assurance of our research, and to ensure facilitating valid and trustworthy counselling in a diverse setting, include the use of multiple data collection strategies (for example, interviews, observation, documentation and records), requesting member checking for agreement on final results, monitoring the counsellors' own bias through continuous reflection, literature review and conversations with other practitioners and researchers in the field, as well as explicitly acknowledging the tensions that may exist in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Some obstacles encountered during the intervention

Most learners and teachers taking part in the project have expressed their satisfaction with the program and have shown an exemplary level of commitment. Most learners have encountered career counselling for the first time ever. The vast majority of learners are granted the opportunity to verbalise their feelings for the first time. We consistently focus on the importance to do something about their depressing circumstances by talking about challenges, joining hands, sharing newly-found knowledge, studying harder, working cooperatively, and looking on the bright side of things, for example by starting vegetable gardens. We help them to believe in their own potential; we link subject choices and achievement with career choices and we facilitate appropriate career possibilities. We support them to assume full responsibility for what they do; we bring learners into contact with a world of opportunities, and we facilitate an understanding of the fact that rural settings could and should be used as resources. We are intentionally moving away from a deficit model (i.e., one in which being disadvantaged or being black is viewed as the problem). We implement the notion of mentoring': we bring in successful students, especially students from our previous projects and other successful professional people from the environment in which we work, to serve as mentors for adolescents. Mentors address and motivate learners; for example, a successful engineer can explain why it is necessary to take Mathematics in Year 11 and 12.

Limited value of certain assessment narratives in diverse settings

Researching and developing a deep sense of understanding of the limited value of certain assessment narratives in diverse settings is essential. In our experience, the collage, for instance, has extremely limited value in this particular setting. Member checking informs us that disadvantaged clients in particular are at a major disadvantage when they complete collages because magazines and other materials that are typically employed when collages are created are rare luxuries and thus foreign to most of our disadvantaged

communities. Furthermore, collages of the majority of the participants in our research reflect only their most basic needs, for example the need for basic nutrition, healthcare and relaxation. Drawing, on the other hand, provides a natural mode of self-expression, and lends itself exceptionally well to empowering clients to write' their life stories.

Reflection

Given the limited extent of the research, the findings cannot summarily be extended to other contexts without further investigation. The project team is facilitating learners' personal growth (facilitating the acquisition of adequate career counselling) by consistently encouraging them to find meaning and helping them construct their own futures. Although it is evident that numerous teachers themselves are in desperate need of counselling (and, indeed, life skills training), it has proven difficult to convince the education authorities of the need for career counselling intervention. Furthermore, South African teachers appear to be poorly equipped to deal with career counselling issues, inter alia, as illustrated by the fact that only 52% of all South African teachers have ever attended a workshop on life skills. Teachers' own health and happiness appear to be poorer than that of the rest of the population. Van der Linde (2005, p. 4) recommended that the national Department of Education set up a comprehensive workplace healthcare program' and this should include a career development program.

Following the research visits and discussions with Department of Education officials, the project team is aiming to establish mechanisms that will enable the intervention to move beyond a recommendation of something that learners can do on their own to a systematic and structured procedure; however, the depressed rural setting in which the project team works almost inevitably disadvantages teachers and learners. As outlined in the original proposal, like others before us, we encountered the problems that are prevalent in the region under discussion.

Conclusion

Given the fact that the traditional approach to career counselling does not yield satisfactory results in South Africa, in the first part of this article we highlighted the need for an innovative approach to career counselling in this country. The results of our project seem to suggest that a postmodern career construction approach may indeed yield more satisfactory results than the traditional approach. Seemingly, local contexts can be accessed in such a way as to accommodate and reflect on intervention-based career construction theoretical underpinnings. If we hope to impact not only on career development, but also on the more generic and immediate ills of unemployment, the poverty cycle, the lack of education, and spiralling crime levels, we will need to extend our theory base to one that is applicable to the entire range of diversity in our country.

With this project we are not merely exposing learners to the best practices in career development. Telling humanity in general, and education and counselling agencies

specifically, about the career development needs of our learners, helping learners to write and rewrite their career stories, helping them to create stories that are psychologically healthier is a caveat for the continued success of generations of adolescents in our country. A career counselling strategy is being developed for all learners in South Africa, including even the traditionally most disadvantaged and the focus on career counselling internationally is being implemented locally. The project team's theory base in career counselling is being broadened to make it more holistic, contextual, and multicultural' (Savickas, 2003, p. 89).

While we realise that more research in this regard is needed to further establish our preliminary thinking, if the comments of learners (and teachers) at this stage of our projects are any indication of the degree of success to be expected, these projects are headed for great success. Given the national challenge to enhance career counselling, our projects could serve as blueprints for similar projects in the near future.

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TABLE 1: OUTLINE OF SOME IDENTIFIED THEMES

Category	Subcategory	
Troubled relationships	Perception of God: 'I can only pray to God to help me prevail.' The self (intrapersonal): 'I wish I was not born.' Others (interpersonal): 'Being a gangster gave me self-respect.' The environment: 'We have no hope, so far away from everything.'	
External factors	Non-supportive teachers and (school) environment Parental inability to help External locus of control: 'I have no control over what happens to me.' No home or single parent family or child-headed family Going without food Living in squatter camps or ghettos Being abused (e.g. raped)	
Internal factors	Intra-psychic	Anxiety (Learned) helplessness Shame Sadness or depression Blaming other people or circumstances Hate Joining gangs
	Perception of self and environment	Poor or low self-concept Low self-esteem Impeded sense of reality testing: 'That's life; it is my fate to suffer.'
	Coping mechanisms	Limited capacity for stress management Drug abuse Committing crime to survive, e.g. stealing Inadequate capacity for problem-solving: 'We are so far away from universities; what can we do?'

Compiled by Maree and Molepo (2006) in conjunction with an external coder