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The need for structured career guidance in a resource-constrained South African school

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Background: Career guidance and counselling in secondary schools are crucial for young adolescents as they embark on the initial stages of shaping their post-school studies and career goals. Initiating career guidance as early as Grade 9 is imperative to ensure alignment between chosen subjects and future career aspirations. The study was conducted with Grade 12 learners at a resource-constrained high school in Cape Town, Western Cape.

Objectives: Utilising the Systems Theory Framework (STF), we sought to explore Grade 12 learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling and its significance in shaping future career choices.

Method: The study used a qualitative methodology. Semi-structured online interviews were used to gather the data, which were then analysed thematically. The study consisted of a sample size of 16 Grade 12 participants.

Results: The findings indicated that learners found career guidance and counselling effective for deciding future occupations, with a preference for opportunities such as job shadowing and interactions with experts in the field of interest. However, limited access to vocational resources and a lack of structured classroom guidance led learners to conduct their own research.

Conclusion: The study recommends that life orientation teachers actively engage with organisations and relevant stakeholders in providing career guidance and counselling to learners and ensure that pupils have sufficient access to career resources for effective career guidance.

Contribution: These findings are a valuable resource for professionals and policymakers seeking to improve high school learners' educational experiences, providing a framework for future scholars delving into the dynamic field of career counselling.

Keywords: career guidance; career counselling; subject choices; career resources; South Africa.

Introduction

In the realm of education and career development, career assistance emerges as a crucial element, aiding young individuals in navigating dynamic job markets and making informed decisions about their educational paths (Barnes et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). Career counselling plays a pivotal role in helping adolescents understand their interests, goals, talents and qualifications, especially in the face of an ever-changing employment landscape (Albien, 2018). Recognising the significance of choosing a career with care, Roy (2020) emphasises the need for adequate support and guidance to assist learners in discovering suitable subject choices and making well-informed career decisions.

The process of formally selecting subjects for secondary school in Grade 9 marks a significant milestone for South African high school learners, particularly those in the Black community[1] who often lack support in this crucial decision-making phase (Maketekete, 2022). The absence of guidance and counselling during this phase may lead to haphazard subject choices, impacting learners' post-school career trajectories (Naidoo et al., 2020). Limited parental expertise and awareness of the school curriculum further compound the challenges faced by learners in making informed subject selections (Albien & Naidoo, 2017; Pillay, 2020). The repercussions of ill-considered subject choices may limit study options after matriculation and contribute to South Africa's persistently high youth unemployment rates (Dlamini, 2019; Streicher, 2020). Based on these findings, it may imply that without adequate guidance and counselling support for learners, there may be a continuous cycle of limited and ill-informed career decision-making,

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1.The term black people used is aligned with the ethnicity descriptions included in the *Employment Equity Amendment Act No. 47* of 2013 (Republic of South Africa, 2014).

impacting the quality of employment, suitable for career and limited opportunity to reach self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, the issue of inadequate career guidance extends beyond subject selection, impacting the broader context of youth unemployment in South Africa. Graduate unemployment is particularly concerning, with a lack of effective career counselling identified as a significant contributor (Mseleku, 2022; Stats SA, 2023). The high youth unemployment rate, especially among those aged 15–24, highlights the vulnerability of this age group in the South African labour force (Stats SA, 2023). The study by Mseleku (2022) reveals that graduates often face challenges in securing employment because of factors such as a lack of demand for their skills, a mismatch between expertise and job market needs and insufficient work experience. This signifies the potential consequences of inadequate career guidance and counselling in making effective career decisions and navigating the job market (Modiba & Sefotho, 2019).

While much research on career guidance focuses on the perspective of professional career counsellors, the perspective of Grade 12 learners remains relatively unexplored. For example, a study conducted by Diale (2016) aimed to address the career development needs of Life Orientation teachers to help them effectively teach the curriculum. The findings revealed the need for resources, stability in the LO subject and formal training. Similarly, Pityi (2020) investigated the experiences of a career development practitioner providing career guidance services. The findings highlighted the need for training and regulatory guidelines for junior career development practitioners. This article addresses this gap by delving into the beliefs and experiences of high school learners, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds who often lack tailored career services (Brown et al., 2016). The qualitative approach employed in this contribution seeks to understand how learners perceive the value of career guidance and counselling in secondary schools and aims to uncover the types of career guidance that prove effective for learners in specific socio-economic groups. Employing the Systems Theory Framework (STF), the article aims to inform the development of more suitable and tailored career resources for learners facing unique challenges in their career decision-making process.

Literature review
Background of career guidance and counselling in South Africa

Career guidance in South Africa has been shaped by political and economic factors since its origins in the 1930s, with services historically excluded from people of mixed race groups under apartheid (Naidoo et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2014). This lack of access for people of mixed race[2] persisted until post-apartheid. Schools located in under-resourced communities often lack sufficient infrastructure, trained

2. The term people of mixed race used is aligned with the ethnicity descriptions included in the *Employment Equity Amendment Act No. 47* of 2013 (Republic of South Africa, 2014).

teachers and career education material. According to the study conducted by Sefotho (2017), it was found that the majority of the learners in under-resourced communities in South Africa lack sufficient access to career counselling services as their schools often lack trained educators or psychologists onsite. Similarly, Dlamini's (2019) study revealed that educators from the same communities' struggle to provide adequate career guidance because of resource constraints and proper training. These findings might suggest that the current levels of accessibility to appropriate services are limited in some resource-constrained communities, even post-apartheid. More recently, demand has grown because of high unemployment and skills mismatches in the workforce (Makola et al., 2021; Morse, 2019). Therefore, the improvement of services is targeted through initiatives that involve updating competency frameworks and integrating them into the national curriculum (Jonck & Swanepoel, 2019; Maree, 2013; Sefotho, 2017). As demonstrated by Robertson (2013), the accessibility of career guidance can empower youth, enabling them to make informed life decisions and increasing their confidence in managing further education. Unfortunately, the issue of equitable access, highlighted by Albien (2021), persists and limits options for certain groups. In addition, meeting the needs of career development in the country is a major challenge that calls for better guidance professional training and provision. Albien (2021) further claims that an ad hoc approach to guiding and counselling in schools is often marked by a shortage of qualified and trained teachers. To address the country's career development needs, there is a need to enhance the provision and training of guidance professionals.

Career guidance and counselling in South African schools

Despite the potential effectiveness of career guidance and counselling services, learners often face challenges in making informed decisions about their futures, leading to a lack of awareness regarding their possibilities. Mokodutlo's (2019) study on high school learners conducted in South Africa revealed that poor subject decisions, contributing to inadequate career choices, were often influenced by social factors. Hako (2021) further emphasises that this lack of exposure results in learners having ordinary self-confidence levels and low career aspirations because of uninformed perspectives on their abilities and potential career pathways. The consequences of insufficient career guidance are far-reaching, leading to a continuous cycle of uninformed career decisions, unrealistic expectations and adverse outcomes such as school failure, dropouts and the pursuit of careers solely for perceived financial gains (Hako, 2021). The challenges faced by learners suggest that there may be a deficiency in the delivery of high-quality services, even though this is a major goal that the South African Department of Education strives to achieve. In addition to this conversation, it is critical to acknowledge and resolve these issues to improve the general efficacy of the provision of educational services.

Moreover, external support and initiatives from organisations beyond the Department of Education play a crucial role in

enhancing the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling. The South African Career Development Association (SACDA) has developed an educational framework encompassing counselling techniques, self-evaluation tools and information on careers and vocational preparation (SACDA, 2020). Furthermore, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) collaborated with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to launch the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Career Advice Service, providing resources, an occupational guidance helpline, an online platform and a weekly radio broadcast programme across nine local radio stations (DBE, 2021). The Grade 9 Career Assistance Project, adapted into a self-directed format amid the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, exemplifies the adaptability of career initiatives to diverse circumstances, emphasising the importance of external support (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2022). Although learners have access to a wide range of tools, resources and platforms, there is a noteworthy lack of research investigating the effectiveness of recipients' understanding of the distributed material and its dissemination to all learners in the country. Therefore, this emphasises how important it is to incorporate resources and tools into the educational system to guarantee that everyone has fair access to career guidance and counselling.

While career guidance and counselling can function effectively when integrated into the educational system, shortcomings such as the absence of a robust career guidance programme persist when offered by schools, as highlighted in the study by Rukewe and Oats (2020). Learners acknowledge the benefits of career services when adequately provided but express dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of school programmes in meeting their requirements (Makola et al., 2021). Recognising that career initiatives cannot solely rely on educational institutions, the involvement of corporate bodies is emphasised, providing learners with broader opportunities to make informed decisions (Epstein et al., 2018). Furthermore, educators stress the crucial role of career guidance in helping learners understand their strengths and weaknesses and aligning them with suitable career options (Jäckel-Visser et al., 2021). This signifies the need for continuous improvement and collaboration between educational institutions, external organisations and corporate entities to enhance the overall effectiveness of career guidance programmes.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling

Moreover, a meticulous evaluation of career guidance and counselling emphasises its considerable benefits as well as the impediments it encounters. Career guidance and counselling services play a pivotal role in aiding learners to harmonise their career choices with their objectives, competencies and the demands of the market. This alignment has the potential to mitigate skill mismatches, heighten job satisfaction and optimise overall career trajectories (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2014; OECD, 2018; Roy, 2020). The significance of career guidance

and counselling becomes apparent in its capacity to facilitate informed career decisions, instill motivation and inspiration in learners, cultivate self-awareness, nurture career development during childhood and facilitate networking opportunities with professionals across diverse fields (Kashefpakdel & Mann, 2016; Makola et al., 2021; Otwine et al., 2022; Theresa, 2016; Watson et al., 2016). Learners actively seek guidance on a spectrum of aspects, including career decisions, subject combinations, higher education programmes and employment options, underlining the far-reaching impact of career guidance and counselling on their decision-making processes (Otwine et al., 2022).

Challenges of career guidance and counselling

Despite its inherent advantages, career guidance and counselling face numerous challenges that impede its effectiveness. Notably, time constraints emerge as a formidable obstacle, influencing the duration of career counselling sessions and constraining the ability to address essential emotional needs, thereby potentially resulting in misinformed career decisions (Otwine et al., 2022; Reid, 2022). The efficacy of career counselling is further hindered by limited rapport and skills among advisors, underscoring the imperative of establishing meaningful connections and enhancing the proficiency of educators and counsellors delivering career advice (Groves et al., 2023; Kabunga, 2020). Socio-economic disparities introduce additional complexities, as learners in economically disadvantaged schools encounter restricted support because of resource limitations, leading to disparate access to vocational guidance (Groves et al., 2023; Musset & Mýtna Kureková, 2018). According to a study by Groves et al. (2023), career guidance and counselling are not equally prioritised or provided across schools and some learners from economically disadvantaged households only receive a limited amount of support because of time and resource limitations. Despite the fact that career counsellors can be quite helpful and effective, stakeholders claimed that a lack of funding for careers meant that some areas of provision or specific groups of students were left out of career-education opportunities such as individual consultations (Groves et al., 2023). Moreover, a uniform approach and a dearth of diversity in career guidance activities impede the provision of personalised support, potentially overlooking specific professions and sectors (Kumar, 2022; Makola et al., 2021). These challenges highlight the imperative of addressing the multifaceted nature of career guidance and counselling to ensure its efficacy and inclusivity.

Learners' perception of career guidance and counselling in low-resource high schools

Moreover, learners assume a pivotal role as the ultimate beneficiaries of career guidance and counselling programmes within school settings, with their perspectives offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of such initiatives. Studies performed in South Africa also showed a broad pattern of learners who were happy with the career instruction they received in school. According to Dabula and

Makura (2013), 80% of the participants said their school's career guidance programme had given them more confidence in making professional decisions. Other participants believed that the career guidance programme had met their needs for career development and that they were prepared for higher education (Dabula & Makura, 2013). Similarly, another study also discovered that learners saw the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling services at their schools favourably (Adewumi & Adendorff, 2014; Jacobs, 2011; Jonck & Swanepoel, 2015, 2016).

However, the authenticity of learners' enthusiasm has been subject to scrutiny, prompting the utilisation of tools such as Jonck's (2014) assessment of the efficacy of Career Guidance in Life Orientation, which may provide nuanced insights into the matter (Adewumi & Adendorff, 2014). According to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), Life Orientation is the study of an individual's self-relative to others and the community. The topics covered include occupations and professional alternatives, social interaction, physical activity, knowledge of the environment, responsible citizenship, leading a healthy and productive life and self-awareness (Department of Basic Education, 2011). It is noteworthy that some learners perceive Life Orientation as lacking purpose, dull and falling short of its national curriculum objectives (Jacobs, 2011). Issues such as the inadequacy of essential tools in schools, insufficient career guidance and limited access to university information contribute to learners seeking alternative sources for career advice (Maila & Ross, 2018; Njoko, 2019; Ramjit, 2015).

Despite a general consensus on the positive impact of career guidance and counselling on learners, particularly in South Africa, discernible discrepancies exist, especially within underserved schools. Influences from peer pressure, family dynamics, educators and media significantly shape learners' perceptions of professional education, with their beliefs about the effectiveness of career guidance closely tied to their levels of career maturity (Adewale et al., 2017; Dabula & Makura, 2013; Shafie et al., 2018). The evident disparities and shortcomings in the efficacy of career counselling services, particularly in underserved schools, underscore the necessity for a proactive approach that equips learners with the requisite skills for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Kayembe & Nel, 2019). The potential adverse consequences for learners making career decisions without adequate knowledge emphasise the critical importance of addressing existing gaps in high school career guidance and counselling. In contributing to this ongoing discourse, it is crucial to recognize the possible long-term consequences this vulnerable set of learners may experience in long-term such as graduate unemployability because of mismatch in skillsets or interests. By taking steps to address these issues, proactive measures can be put in place to make a positive impact on learners' future success and fulfillment by giving them the opportunity to realign their career pathways according to their interests and level of job satisfaction. As a fur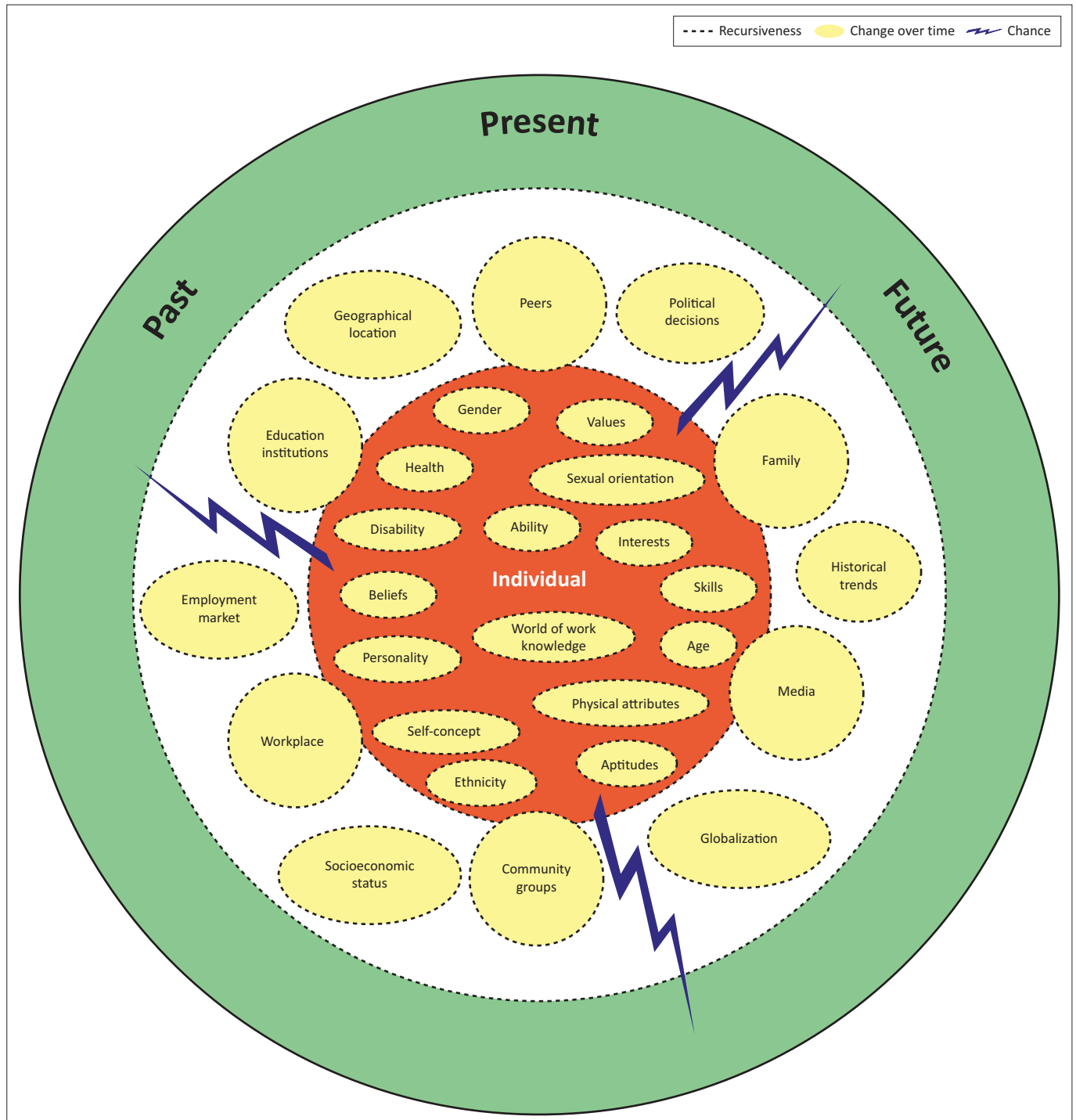ther proactive measure, the study aims to explore Grade 12 learners' perception of the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling and to identify valuable career resources when making career decisions.

Theoretical framework

Young and Popadiuk (2012) highlight the systems theory framework's (STF) significant impact on career development, emphasising its role in connecting research, theory and practice. Vondracek et al. (2014) further endorse its comprehensive nature, integrating diverse fields. Patton and McMahon (1999, 2006) contribute by applying systems theory to professional theory and career counselling, recognising its utility in understanding occupational development. The STF has notably enhanced career development theory and practice over time, acknowledging the complexity of job development and aiding individuals in understanding occupational contexts (Patton & McMahon, 2015).

In the South African context, however, the STF lacks sufficient attention to the time dimension, particularly the historical implications of the educational system. According to the STF, professional development evolves over time, with past decisions influencing present and future decisions (McMahon & Patton, 2020; Patton & McMahon, 2006). Unfortunately, learners in South Africa often make career decisions in isolation, lacking historical support. This suggests a need for South African learners to prioritise historical understanding in their career development, emphasising the importance of time in applying the STF.

The STF (Figure 1) functions as a metatheoretical framework, amalgamating diverse career theories to bridge theory and application (Patton & McMahon, 2015). It underscores systems thinking and mapping to grasp the interconnectedness of influence systems over time (Patton & McMahon, 2006). According to McMahon (2024), understanding how different components of a system are interconnected and affect an individual's problems and overall situation is the goal of systems thinking. Whereas systems mapping provides in-depth insights that improve comprehension of the individual's environment and decision-making process by illuminating these impacts using visual aids such as genograms, timelines and mind maps (McMahon, 2024). Blustein (2015) underscores its usefulness in locating and applying theoretical insights in career development, delineating variables influencing professional development within complex systems. For Grade 12 learners, the STF provides a valuable tool to assess the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2006). It emphasises systemic thinking and mapping in conceptualising professional development strategies (McMahon & Patton, 2018). Recognising individuals within larger systems such as families, communities and educational institutions, it analyses contextual factors affecting career decisions (McMahon & Patton, 2020). According to Patton and McMahon (2006), the STF can assist the researcher in examining the many

Recursiveness - - - -   **Change over time**   **Chance**

Present

Past

Future

Geographical location

Peers

Political decisions

Education institutions

Gender

Values

Family

Health

Sexual orientation

Disability

Ability

Interests

Historical trends

Beliefs

Individual

Skills

Employment market

Personality

World of work knowledge

Age

Media

Workplace

Self-concept

Physical attributes

Ethnicity

Aptitudes

Globalization

Socioeconomic status

Community groups

Source: Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2015). The systems theory framework of career development: 20 years of contribution to theory and practice. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 24*(3), 141–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416215579944

FIGURE 1: Systems theory framework.

components of the career development system and comprehending the interactions that take place between learners and career counsellors in a counselling situation. The researcher can use systems mapping to depict and analyse the multifaceted nature of career exploration programmes within educational institutions, particularly their impact on curriculum and the function of career education. This method enables a thorough investigation of the numerous variables influencing the efficacy of career guidance and counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Research methodology

The research methodology outlines how a researcher systematically designs, collects and analyses data in order to achieve research objectives. It involves making decisions about gathering and analysing data with the goal of producing reliable results while minimising biases (McCombes & George, 2023). In this study, the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling in high school settings is the specific event under investigation. The qualitative

research method is the approach used, and it is a useful tool for both the researcher and the participants to gain a thorough understanding of the contextual significance of the study.

Research design
Qualitative research

Qualitative research collects and analyses non-numerical data to understand the opinions, thoughts and experiences of participants (Bhandari, 2020). This research design method evaluates the complexity of the study issue and provides in-depth insights (Bhandari, 2020). Examining a phenomenon's nature entails considering its qualitative characteristics, various manifestations, surrounding circumstances and possible points of view (Busetto et al., 2020, p. 1). A qualitative research design was used for this study over a quantitative one because semi-structured online interviews were used to get first-hand accounts from participants and understand the research phenomenon (Bhandari, 2020).

Qualitative descriptive

To investigate the problem statement and research questions, the study used a qualitative descriptive approach. With interviews and other qualitative data, people's experiences and points of view can be summarised because of this design (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). However, its shortcomings include limited generalisability and reliance on participants' accurate responses (Kim et al., 2017). The purpose of the study was to investigate how Grade 12 learners perceived the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling (Sandelowski, 2000). The layout promotes the collection and evaluation of learners' perspectives and experiences (Doyle et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017).

Participants' setting and characteristics

The research was carried out at a historically disadvantaged public school in the Western Cape, South Africa. The school, sponsored by donors, aimed to provide technological resources, including a computer hub, to help learners develop computer literacy. The school offered a range of fourteen subjects for subject selection. The study employed semi-structured online interviews during recess to ensure privacy and confidentiality. This approach was chosen to gather diverse perceptions without overwhelming data repetition, adhering to the methodological considerations outlined by Mason (2010). The interviews were conducted in the computer hub at the school where each participant had access to laptop and a headset. The participants consisted of learners from underprivileged backgrounds and communities that attended the school. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

The study involved sixteen Grade 12 learners from a high school in the Western Cape, all attending the same school but distributed across various subject classes. The participant

TABLE 1: Table of participants' characteristics.

Participant	Age	Gender	Have you ever been exposed to some type of career guidance and counselling?
1	18	Female	No
2	17	Female	No
3	18	Male	Yes
4	17	Female	No
5	18	Male	No
6	18	Male	No
7	18	Male	No
8	17	Female	No
9	18	Male	No
10	19	Male	Yes
11	17	Male	Not really
12	17	Female	No
13	17	Female	Not really
14	18	Male	Yes
15	18	Male	No
16	18	Female	No

group comprised seven females and nine males, all identified as mixed race individuals, with ages ranging between 17 and 19 years. The research aimed to explore the influence of career guidance and counselling support on the participants' future career choices, prompting an investigation into their experiences with such support.

Data analysis and collection
Data collection

Data collection in this research involved using semi-structured online interviews to gather information on Grade 12 learners' perceptions of career guidance and counselling. Specifically, following careful consideration of multiple factors, online video-conferencing interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, conducted through the Microsoft (MS) Teams and WhatsApp video calling platforms. Mwanda's study (2022) confirmed the efficacy of online video conferencing for individual and group discussions, ensuring equitable participation despite time constraints, language barriers or geographical isolation, thus producing robust datasets. In addition, this approach facilitated the observation of social cues (Irani, 2019). The chosen technique allowed participants to provide detailed responses, fostering open sharing of their experiences and perceptions (Longhurst, 2003). The interview questions were informed by the systems theory of career development, incorporating demographic factors, career interests, guidance information and knowledge. Throughout the study, participants were presented with a sequence of questions designed to assess their comprehension and viewpoints regarding career guidance and counselling. The questions explored different facets, encompassing their understanding of career guidance, its personal importance to them and their perceptions of its utility. Moreover, participants were asked to describe the specific resources they found helpful for successful career advising and to consider the support they had received in this area. Moreover, they were requested to review the efficacy of the materials supplied and determine

their preparedness to make well-informed professional decisions after finishing Grade 12.

Procedures

The recruitment procedure involved obtaining consent from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), gaining approval from the University of the Western Cape's Human Research Ethics Committee and reaching out to schools via email and telephone. After receiving approval from a responsive school, potential participants were approached through the Head of the Department (HOD) for Grade 9 and interested learners provided their details for formal invitations. The researcher sought permission and obtained consent from participants and their parents or guardians using hardcopies, considering limitations in electronic mail and mobile phone access. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp video calling. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw and verbal consent was audio recorded. The researcher archived the audio recordings securely, ensuring ethical considerations were maintained.

Data analysis

Data analysis is a crucial step in turning gathered data into a comprehensible story, involving coding and thematic analysis. Coding, as described by Theron (2015), facilitated the organisation of data for the qualitative study. The coding process involved systematic interpretation, categorisation and iterative refinement of codes and categories. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, aimed to identify patterns within the data and explain those themes in the context of the research questions. The six phases included gaining a deep understanding of the data by thoroughly familiarising oneself with the entire data set, including all interviews and any other pertinent information. For this study, each transcript was read multiple times to ensure comprehension. Next, initial codes were generated by identifying significant statements from the transcripts about Grade 12 learners' perceptions and experiences with career guidance and counselling. The search for themes followed, where these significant statements were used to create meanings, grouped by supporting quotations, and developed into themes based on comparable concepts. During the review phase, the researcher categorised and refined these meanings. In the defining themes phase, the researcher provided thorough descriptions and definitions of any recurrent themes. The process concluded with the write-up of the research findings, where the relevant themes were reported in a write-up. Ethical considerations, such as maintaining participant confidentiality and obtaining informed consent, were consistently adhered to throughout the data analysis process.

Quality rigour

The trustworthiness of the research was assured through credibility, transferability and dependability. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), the degree of confidence in the reliability of the results is a key component of research credibility. To ensure accurate interpretations, the researcher thoroughly explained the objectives and purposes of the research to the participants as a crucial part of the data collection process. For transferability, Korstjens and Moser (2018) describe it as how well findings from qualitative research may be used in various scenarios with numerous participants. In this study, the researcher enhanced the transparency and understandability of the findings by detailing the research procedure, context and participant characteristics. Lastly, dependability, which includes the consistency of study findings over time, was addressed by providing a general description of the various processes involved in conducting the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical considerations

In adherence to comprehensive research ethics, this study, as outlined by Saunders et al. (2012), diligently addressed various elements encompassing the development of research concepts, planning, execution and data collection. Ethical considerations extended to the responsible handling of analysed data and the ethical presentation of research findings. The study meticulously followed ethical guidelines, securing clearance from the Social Science Research Ethics Committee (ethical clearance no: HS22/8/67) and obtaining permissions from the WCED and the school principal. Ensuring transparency, participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, purpose and the audio recording of interview responses, with the option to withdraw without consequences. Consent from parents and assent from participants, especially minors, were obtained, emphasising participants' rights, confidentiality and protection from potential harm. Participants' codes and demographic information were securely maintained, underscoring reliability and conformity to ethical standards. Notably, the study prioritised the participants' right to privacy, explicitly communicated the option to withdraw from the interview without consequences and refrained from any form of coercion.

Findings and discussion

The themes identified in this contribution offer an examination of how participants perceive career guidance and counselling. It is evident that the participants highlight the importance of career guidance and counselling for making well-informed career choices, emphasising the value of exploring a variety of resources and underpin the significance of conducting personal research and engaging with professionals in their chosen fields. In addition, most participants expressed their preparedness and determination to move forward in their selected career paths, all while recognising the necessity of continuous learning and self-exploration. The themes presented significant insights regarding learners' perceptions and can be summarised as follows: (1) career guidance as a supportive mechanism, (2) need for accessible career

guidance resources, (3) importance of support network in career choices and (4) confidence through adequate career guidance.

Theme 1: Career guidance as a supportive mechanism

The insights gathered from participants emphasise the indispensable role of professional guidance in the process of making career decisions. The holistic support offered by career guidance, extending beyond academic assistance, is highlighted by Participant 1, which signifies the emotional and spiritual benefits that contribute to overcoming stress associated with academic challenges:

> 'It's very important as it helps you emotionally and spiritually as one can sometimes be discouraged by all the stress of schoolwork, but having someone that can help you with your career can make a difference.' (Participant 1, Female, 18 years old)

The contribution brings to light the multifaceted nature of guidance and counselling, addressing various domains such as academic, personal and social aspects. When asked about their impressions of career guidance and counselling, Participant 7 emphasises the importance and value of career guidance for Grade 12 learners, indicating the widespread uncertainty among students about their future paths. The narratives highlight the significance of having someone experienced guide them through the complexities of career choices. In addition, some Participants stated the following:

> 'It's important that each Grade 12 learner gets it. Like at my school, most learners don't even know what they want to do next year.' (Participant 7, Male, 18 years old)

> 'I think it's very important. I feel like you need someone who is already in the adult world, who lets you know what you need to do and what is out there and guide you.' (Participant 12, Female, 17 years old)

> 'Someone who maybe helps you to make a decision about your studies or career after school.' (Participant 16, Female, 18 years old)

As read in the responses, the participants perceive career guidance and counselling as a supportive mechanism for making sound decisions regarding educational paths and career choices. They emphasised its value in aiding them in making informed choices in their career pursuits. The sentiment is echoed by Streicher (2021), emphasising the necessity for learners to access professional knowledge, understand their unique job interests and receive guidance on achieving their future goals. Mailula's (2021) findings further support this notion, indicating that participants believe career counselling can alleviate uncertainty in career decision-making. Collectively, these perspectives emphasise the critical need for efficient career guidance and counselling resources to assist Grade 12 pupils in making informed and meaningful career choices, aligning with the broader goal of identifying their abilities and potential, as suggested by Shah et al. (2021).

Theme 2: Need for accessible career guidance resources

The collective insights from participants underscore the pivotal role of independent efforts and effective resources in the career decision-making process. When asked how learners can go about obtaining information, Participants 1 and 2 highlighted the significance of proactive exploration and independent research in aiding career choices, emphasising the value of gathering information through avenues such as open days and online research:

> 'They can look at their interest and do research about the career. They can attend open days for the career they want to pursue.' (Participant 1, Female, 18 years old)

> 'So, when I went online it told me the different places to go and work, like hospitals, prisons and rehabilitation centres. So that was very helpful because it gave me an idea of where I can work as a social worker.' (Participant 2, Female, 17 years old)

The findings align with Quinlan and Renninger's (2022) research, emphasising that active exploration and research positively influence career decisions. However, findings emerge regarding the lack of social justice in career guidance resources. Limited resources and access to information about career opportunities create disparities, showcasing the challenges faced by some participants in receiving adequate career guidance support:

> 'Like at my school, we don't have access to a lot of things, so I think like getting people to come to us to tell us what is available. We have visits from colleges now and then. But it's almost like we are limited to that because of our resources being limited, especially at my school.' (Participant 7, Male, 18 years old)

> 'I have been to open days; however, our school doesn't really give guidance as to where we need to go. Maybe, uhm, a bit more structure to understand about my career.' (Participant 10, Male, 19 years old)

This demonstrates participants' lack of adequate career resources, specifically relating to visits from further education institutions and having a structured process for career guidance. This result was generally consistent with Maree's (2015) findings, which revealed that learners from disadvantaged areas receive little to no career assistance and information while making career-related decisions. The participants emphasise the crucial need for easily accessible and effective resources, particularly when learners actively guide their career exploration. This aligns with Shah et al.'s (2021) recommendation for comprehensive Grade 12 career guidance sessions, aiming to facilitate informed career decisions and guide academic choices for university studies. These sessions are deemed invaluable for students. The findings highlight the importance of socially just distribution of career guidance resources, supporting Maree's (2022) assertion that the emphasis is on fostering fairness and equal opportunity in accessing career aid across diverse backgrounds. This may imply the necessity to provide both individual and collective career guidance support, ensuring that underprivileged learners are well informed and have equitable access to resources for their career journeys.

Theme 3: Importance of support network in career choices

According to the findings, participants emphasised the importance of motivation and encouragement from their families, friends and teachers. Participant 1 highlighted how her family, friends and teachers played a vital role in motivating and encouraging her to pursue her career aspirations. As Participant 1, this sentiment was also shared by Participants 8 and 15:

'People must be there to motivate me and to encourage me to keep pushing for my career. Such as my family, friends, and teachers.' (Participant 1, Female, 18 years old)

'I would probably choose my teachers. My Grade 8 and 9 teachers. They advised me what I need to do and how to start and plan my career.' (Participant 8, Female, 17 years old)

'I spoke to my teachers and my uncle … I took the teacher's advice and took my own introspection and made a decision based on my career. Uhm, basically, I need time, I need support, motivation and someone to be there when I need them.' (Participant 15, Male, 18 years old)

These narratives reflect the belief held by the participants that receiving motivation and encouragement from their family, friends and teachers plays a vital role in shaping their decisions about their future careers. The research conducted by Mtemeri (2017) supported this idea, demonstrating that family members indeed had an impact on learners' career choices. This contribution also revealed that schools impacted high school learners' choice of careers as well as peer advice and encouragement (Mtemeri, 2017). However, a sub-group of participants notices the importance of proactive engagement with teachers for effective career guidance, as highlighted by Participants 3 and 7. While the research suggests limited guidance during classroom sessions, the value of teachers as enablers becomes evident when learners actively seek career-related information:

'At school the teachers offered me support when I had questions about my career choice.' (Participant 3, Male, 18 years old)

'When I was sure about a career in political science, my LO teacher was able to advise me that there aren't many jobs in that field.' (Participant 7, Male, 18 years old)

This finding aligns with Mailula's (2021) study, emphasising the limited role of teachers in vocational guidance unless specific career-related queries are raised. Based on the narratives, participants demonstrate an awareness of the dual importance of external motivation and proactive engagement with teachers for effective career guidance. This corresponds with the influence parents may have on their children's decision-making, as seen in Maila and Ross's (2018) study, and supports Sackett et al.'s (2018) findings highlighting the significant impact of teachers and career counsellors on learners' decisions. The participants' perspective seems to align with the broader idea that the educational environment might play a pivotal role in shaping career-related decision-making (Patton & McMahon, 2006).

Theme 4: Confidence through adequate career guidance

A prevailing sense of preparedness for post-high school career decisions was evident among some participants, as exemplified by Participant 2, who confidently expressed her passion for helping people and her readiness to pursue tertiary education at institutions such as Stellenbosch University and University of the Western Cape (UWC). As Participant 2, Participant 14 also echoed a sense of readiness, emphasising the importance of research and discussions with others to clarify career choices. When asked about their readiness to make a career decision, the participant answered as follows:

'Yes. It's something I always wanted to become because I have a passion to help people and take people out of their circumstances that are not very good where they are living. I have also applied at universities such as Stellenbosch and UWC.' (Participant 2, Female, 17 years old)

'Yes, I have done my research and spoke to my neighbour to make sure that I am clear on what I want to do.' (Participant 14, Male, 18 years old)

This aligns with research by Datar and Ahmad (2019), emphasising the role of career information services in enhancing students' understanding of available options. However, some participants exhibited uncertainty and hesitation regarding their readiness for career decisions. Participant 6 mentioned external opinions causing self-doubt, highlighting the influence of societal pressures on students' career choices. Participant 7 expressed ongoing information gathering and incomplete university applications, indicating a lack of readiness. These findings may imply that with available and structured career guidance support, learners may exhibit more confidence and certainty in their decision making:

'No. I am second guessing myself because people are asking me why I want to become a teacher, so I started to listen to other people.' (Participant 6, Male, 18 years old)

'No. I don't think I'm ready. So, for me I'm still trying to gather information on my own. But also trying to finish my university applications.' (Participant 7, Male, 18 years old)

The participants' mixed responses appear to highlight the varied levels of readiness and confidence in making post-high school career decisions. While some express assurance through proactive measures, others highlight challenges influenced by societal pressures and limited access to career information. This suggests the importance of comprehensive career guidance and support to address the diverse needs of learners as they navigate this critical decision-making phase. The research findings reveal that participants acknowledge the importance of guidance and counselling in making informed career decisions. While existing career guidance may have been effective in fostering learners' confidence, a gap appears to exist in the provision of structured, in-class information sessions conducted by Life Orientation teachers. Consequently, learners are left to independently navigate their career decision-making process through self-initiated research and seeking guidance. This introduces potential challenges, as the

effectiveness of learners' comprehension depends on their interpretation of information for shaping informed career choices. The findings suggest the ongoing need for abundant career resources and emphasise the necessity for a well-structured career programme led by Life Orientation teachers.

Limitation

Several noticeable limitations were discovered by the study conducted at the chosen school with learners. Firstly, the interviews were conducted online, which posed a challenge in establishing rapport as the participants were unable to engage in face-to-face interactions with the researcher. The utilisation of video calling might have mitigated this limitation to some extent. Secondly, the occurrence of load shedding[3] during the data collection phase resulted in interruptions during the interview sessions, necessitating the repetition of questions because of connectivity issues. Moreover, time constraints imposed limitations on the study, as interviews were conducted during recess, limiting participants' availability. This constraint potentially impacted the depth and breadth of the data collected. The researcher also faced limited control over the school environment, as activities during recess times occasionally changed last minute, and classroom disruptions were a factor that could influence the research process.

Moreover, the participants were exclusively in their Grade 12 (final) year of high school. Given that career guidance ideally commences as early as Grade 9 when learners must make subject selections with some form of guidance, a broader sampling strategy, involving interviews with learners in Grades 9, 10 and 11, could have potentially yielded more comprehensive results. Thus, providing a more comprehensive representation of their perceptions of the efficacy of career counselling and guidance for future career choices. Lastly, because of the school's designation as a quantile 4 school,[4] it is possibly that the limitation of this research study is that it might not adequately represent the career guidance and counselling tailored to low socio-economic conditions. When drawing conclusions about the school's ability to serve learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, this classification could potentially introduce uncertainty. The results of the study imply that the relationship between the school's quantile rating and the socio-economic position of the parents or the availability of resources at the school might not be entirely accurate, which could potentially limit the usefulness of the findings to low socio-economic conditions.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that participants recognise the significance of receiving guidance and counselling concerning making a decision regarding their careers. Moreover, the available career guidance appears to be effective, potentially instilling learners

with the confidence to take charge of their decision-making process. However, the research also uncovers a gap in structured, in-class information sessions delivered by Life Orientation teachers. Consequently, learners are compelled to independently navigate this process through self-initiated research and proactive seeking of guidance. This introduces additional challenges, as the extent of learners' comprehension hinges on how they interpret the information to shape their informed career choices. This highlights the ongoing need for ample career resources and emphasises the requirement for a structured career programme led by Life Orientation teachers.

Recommendations for future research

The study proposes multifaceted recommendations to address deficiencies in career guidance and counselling for learners. Firstly, it advocates for a comprehensive national research initiative in South Africa, drawing on Maketekete's (2022) and Mailula's (2021) suggestions for a comparative study between public and affluent schools. This research aims to provide nuanced data reflecting diverse learner experiences, facilitating a more precise evaluation of career guidance across the educational system and identifying potential gaps at the school level. To deepen the study, there is an emphasis on triangulating learner experiences by incorporating the perspectives of Life Orientation teachers, following Jonck's (2015) and Makola et al.'s (2021) recommendations. This involves actively seeking feedback from both learners and teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of how learners engage with and benefit from the provided career guidance.

Secondly, the recommendation addresses learners' reliance on independent research for career decisions by suggesting alignment of Life Orientation educators' practices with the Department of Education's goals. Initiatives such as career weeks are proposed to enhance learner preparedness and information. Additionally, the study calls for research on effective strategies for teachers to provide necessary resources, preventing decisions based on limited or incorrect information, as highlighted by Dama et al. (2020) and Mtemeri (2017). Lastly, the study underscores learners' strong desire for job shadowing experiences and professional visits. Recommendations include establishing connections with local organisations, arranging workplace visits and inviting professionals for informative career sessions at schools, aligning with the broader goal of enlightening students about education and employment options, as advocated by Rukewe and Oats (2020).

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3. According to the Western Cape Government (2019), load shedding is a practice by energy utilities to lessen strain on the energy-producing system by temporarily halting energy distribution to specific geographic areas.

4. Schools in quintile 1, 2 and 3 have been declared no-fee schools, while schools in quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools (Grant, 2013).

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

All the authors of this article belong to the same community engagement group and were involved in different duties in authoring this article. A.F. was responsible for conceptualising the article, correspondence, writing, collection and analysing data and finalising the article. Additionally, A.F. was responsible for the methodology and the literature review. M.d.P. was responsible for initiating drafts and proofreading.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available from the corresponding author, A.F., upon reasonable request.

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