Life Design Counseling Group Intervention with Portuguese Adolescents:

A Process and Outcome Study

Abstract

This article examines the process and outcome of a Life Design Counseling group intervention with students in grades 9 and 12. First, we applied a quasi-experimental methodology to analyze the intervention's effectiveness in promoting Career Certainty, Career Decision-Making, Self-Efficacy, and Career Adaptability in a sample of 236 students. Second, focus groups comprising 33 participants were conducted, examining participants' perceptions of the intervention process and outcome. Our findings showed that the intervention had a significant effect on both Career Certainty and Career Self-Efficacy, but it had no effect on Career Adaptability. Our results also showed that MCS had a stronger effect on grade 12 students. Focus group participants reported on the usefulness of MCS, as well as on its benefits, which include increased information, as well as a sense of direction, self-discovery, connection, and increased self-awareness. Grade 9 participants expressed more difficulties in narrating self-experience than grade 12 participants did. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: adolescents, career construction, group intervention, process, outcome.

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In an increasingly globalized and digital world, changes in life context tend to occur more quickly than ever, resulting in greater unpredictability of life trajectories. This reality has led to a need to develop approaches for preparing people for the unpredictability of life, approaches that emphasize flexibility, adaptability, and life-long learning (Savickas, 2015).

Career Construction Theory (CCT; Savickas, 2005; 2013) was formulated to meet these social challenges. In this framework, emphasis is placed on the interpretative and interpersonal processes that underlie vocational behavior and career development. Thus, this approach promotes practices centered on the construction of meaning, aimed at supporting individuals in understanding their own uniqueness as a means to facilitate the development of career plans that are not restricted merely to work role.

Life Design Counseling (LDC; Savickas, 2011) is an application of CCT. This approach holds that individuals give meaning to their lives and relationships through stories. In this context, the counselor uses the client's life stories to facilitate the rewriting of a coherent, continuous representation of self-experience, that is, the construction of a narrative identity. This process is implemented through three face-to-face counseling sessions (Savickas, 2011). In the first session, after the client defines the problem, the Career Construction Interview (CCI; Savickas, 2011) is conducted, facilitating the narration of episodes from the client's life story. In the second session, the counselor and the client explore the narrated episodes to identify the client's life theme, that is, the core problem in his/her life and the solutions that he/she has implemented in attempting to solve it (Csikszetmihalyi & Beattie, 1979). The aim is to help the client unify the fragments of the life story related in the interview, rewriting the grand narrative

of his/her life with a sense of continuity and coherence. In the third session, the counselor and the client focus on the construction and implementation of career plans.

Recent research on LDC has found evidence of its efficacy in both one-on-one (Rehfuss, Del Corso, Galvin & Wykes, 2011; Obi, 2015) and group counseling for adults (Di Fabio & Maree, 2011). Research on the process of individual LDC with adults reveals a pattern of change in which the client first attains an understanding of the causes and consequences of his/her problem. This type of change grounds the subsequent construction of a new self-representation and expressions of well-being. In short, the client's pattern of change unfolds parallel to the aims of each LDC session (Cardoso, Silva, Gonçalves & Duarte, 2014a;b; Cardoso, Gonçalves, Duarte, Silva & Alves, 2016).

Although the number of studies on the process and outcome of LDC practices is growing, there remains a lack of studies about its potential for group interventions with adolescents. Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyze the process and outcome of a group intervention, based on LDC, for students in grades 9 and 12.

My Career Story and adolescents' career education

My Career Story (MCS; Savickas & Hartung, 2012) is an autobiographical workbook for LDC, containing three parts that correspond to the three sessions of LDC face-to-face counseling. Thus, the first part of the workbook, "Telling My Story", begins with defining the client's problem, outlining expectations for the intervention, and compiling a list of occupations that the client has considered taking up. Next, the client answers four questions related to life-career themes: (1) role models (for self-construction), (2) books and movies fitting the current script, (3) magazines or TV shows reflecting interests, and (4) sayings or mottos for self-guidance. The second part, "Hearing My Story", helps identify life themes and interests, as well

as facilitating the reconstruction of the life story and the exploration of educational and

occupational plans. For those purposes, the following assessments are carried out in this section:

(1) Who am I?/Who am I becoming?, (2) Where do I like to be?, (3) the Summary Portrait, and

(4) Rewriting My Story. Finally, the third part of the workbook, "Enacting My Story", focuses

on defining goals and identifying resources for their implementation (Savickas & Hartung,

2012).

  MCS meets adolescents' needs for identity construction and career development while

simultaneously reinforcing LDC as a lifelong career counseling practice. In fact, adolescence is a

life stage in which career choices must be made that will influence the individual's educational

and professional future. However, the response to these developmental tasks demands the

elaboration of a sense of personal continuity and coherence that enable the integration of career

plans in this representation (Blustein & Noumir, 1996; Erikson, 1968; Vondracek, 1992). As

discussed above, from the narrative perspective of LDC, the continuous and coherent

representation of the self is called "narrative identity" (Savickas, 2011). The development of a

narrative identity is a gradual process that is reciprocally influenced by the individual's

repertoire of cognitive skills and the relational and cultural contexts in which he/she lives

(Blustein & Nourmir, 1996; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). That is, cognitive abilities emerge in the

course of adolescence, facilitating more complex autobiographical thought. Examples of this

include the ability to establish causal links between biographical events, the self, and personal

development; the ability to relate globally coherent life narratives; and the acquisition of cultural

knowledge about normative aspects of life (Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche & Silveira, 2009). In

addition, psychosocial identity dimensions, ranging from gender identity and commitments to

significant others to educational and vocational pursuits, are also influenced by the social and

cultural contexts in which an individual resides during adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Habermas et al., 2009; Havighurst, 1948). To adjust MCS to the specific demands of adolescent development, it is necessary to assess its use in career education practices for this population.

Study purpose

The aim of the present study is to analyze the process and outcome of MCS within the context of career education for adolescents. The analysis of the intervention's outcome is based on the following hypothesis: (H1) The levels of career adaptability, career self-efficacy, and vocational certainty will increase significantly among the participants in a MCS program in comparison with those of control group participants.

To complement outcome assessment and analyze the intervention process, participants' experience with MCS is also examined. Thus, this study is also guided by the following research question: What are the students' perceptions of the process and outcome of MCS implementation?

This study offers several innovative contributions regarding LDC processes and outcomes absent from previous studies (Cardoso et. al. 2014a; b; Cardoso et al., 2016; Di Fabio & Maree, 2011; Obi, 2015; Rehfuss, Del Corso, Galvin & Wykes, 2011). First, it complements quantitative outcome assessments with qualitative assessments of client perceptions of the intervention's benefits. Secondly, by assessing the process and outcome of MCS intervention for adolescents in different stages of career development, it contributes to identifying the critical components of MCS. Additionally, it contributes to understanding how and when to use those critical components effectively, according to students' level of career development, in particular, and psychosocial development, in general. Finally, by assessing MCS practice in a real educational context, this study contributes to building links between LDC research and practice.

Method

Data

To address these objectives, two different types of data were collected. First, researchers conducted a pre-post research design with two equivalent groups (experimental and control groups) to examine participants' evolution throughout the implementation of MCS. Second, focus groups were conducted with experimental group students to understand their perceptions of the intervention process and outcome.

Participants

The sample included 236 students in public Portuguese schools, aged 13 to 19 ($M = 16.3$; $SD = 1.48$). The sample distribution per gender was relatively homogeneous: 113 females and 123 males. The participants attended grades 9 or 12 and thus were facing different transitions in the Portuguese school system. Students in grade 9 are required to finalize their vocational plans because vocational choices for Grade 10 imply a commitment to either an academic path or a transition to work, whereas twelfth-grade participants are required to specify a vocational choice that implies either a school-to-college transition or a second school-to-work transition.

A total of 140 students attended grade 9, with ages ranging from 13 to 16 years ($M = 14.6$; $SD = 1.02$); 96 students attended grade 12, aged between 16 and 19 years ($M = 17.2$; $SD = 1.03$). A total of 120 students were assigned to the experimental group. Among them, 72 were in grade 9 and 48 in grade 12. The control group included 119 students, 68 in grade 9 and 48 in grade 12.

The focus group data included 33 Portuguese adolescents from the experimental group, all of whom attended state schools: 21 (63.6 %) were female and 12 (36.4 %) male, ranging between 14 and 18 years of age ($M = 16.1$; $SD = 1.3$). Among them, 19 were in grade 9, aged

between 13 and 15 years ($M = 14.3$; $SD = .67$), whereas 14 were in grade 12, aged between 16 and 18 years ($M = 17.6$ $SD = .75$).

Research team

The team that conducted the training of counselors, supervised a Master's student in conducting the focus groups, and performed the data analysis was made up of this paper´s three authors. Prior to data analysis, the researchers discussed their expectations concerning outcomes. The aim was to raise awareness of potential biases and to encourage objectivity throughout the analysis. The four researchers expected that the participants would rate the program as being useful and that its main benefit would be the promotion of self-knowledge. The first researcher rated rewriting the life story as being the most difficult task, whereas the other researchers considered the identification of role models to be the most difficult task.

Counselors and training

The program was conducted by five educational psychologists, each having 15 or more years of professional experience in career education. For this study, their training involved a two-hour session on the LDC framework and a three-hour workshop on MCS practice. During the workshop, psychologists performed workbook tasks, analyzed their responses, and reflected on critical aspects of the intervention. The first two authors were available to answer questions over the course of the intervention.

Measures

Vocational Certainty Scale (VCS; Santos, 2007). This scale comprises four items (e.g., "I've already made a definite professional choice and do not intend to change it") that evaluate students' levels of vocational certainty. Participants are asked to indicate their level of vocational certainty on a six-point Likert scale (1= totally disagree, 6= totally agree), in which higher scores

mean higher levels of vocational certainty. The VCS reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in a sample

of Portuguese students was .85 (Santos, 2007). Research findings support the criteria as well as

the convergent and discriminant validities of VCS. Indeed, this measure was sensitive to client

change in career counseling intervention (Cardoso et al., 2016) and it revealed positive

correlations with vocational identity ($r = .66$) and self-esteem ($r = .21$), and negative correlations

with indecisiveness ($r = -.31$) and anxiety ($r = -.24$) (Santos, 2007).

The Career Maturity Inventory – Form C (CMI; Savickas & Porfeli, 2011); Portuguese

version (Janeiro, Ribas & Mota, 2014). This instrument assesses high school students' career

maturity. It is a revised form of the CMI (Crites & Savickas, 1995), reorganized based on the

CCT (Savickas, 2005; 2013). This new version is organized into four scales with six items each:

The Concern subscale assesses the extent to which an individual is oriented toward and involved

in the process of making career decisions; the Curiosity subscale assesses the extent to which an

individual explores the world of work and seeks information on occupations and their

requirements; the Confidence subscale evaluates the extent to which an individual has faith in

her/his ability to make wise career decisions and realistic occupational choices; the fourth scale,

the Consultation subscale, assesses the extent to which an individual seeks advice from others in

making career decisions and occupational choices. The authors (Savickas & Porfeli, 2011) report

a good reliability coefficient for the complete adaptability index, or total score without the

Consultation subscale (.86). In the Portuguese version of the CMI, Janeiro, Ribas, and Mota

(2014) also find a good reliability coefficient (.86) for the CMI total score based on 18 items

(i.e., without the Consultation subscale). These findings also support the CMI construct and

criteria validities. On the one hand, the results revealed a single, higher order factor in the

hierarchical CFA representing career choice readiness. Moreover, the magnitude of the loadings of the first-order factors on the second-order factor of readiness was 0.51 for the Concern scale, 0.83 for the Curiosity scale, and 0.95 for the Confidence scale. On the other hand, CMI allows researchers to differentiate the results of experimental and control group participants in outcome research of group, career counseling interventions (Janeiro et al. 2014).

Career Decision Self-Efficacy Scale — Short Form (CDSE-SF; Betz, Hammond & Multon, 2005), Portuguese version (Miguel, Silva & Prieto, 2013). This scale assesses an individual's beliefs in his/her capacity to successfully complete the tasks and perform the specific behaviors required for making career decisions. The CDSE-SF contains 25 items, answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all confident to 5 = totally confident. The items are organized into five scales, corresponding to the following five areas of competency for making career choices: accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, goal selection, making plans for the future, and problem solving. Empirical study with the CDSE-SF shows reliability coefficients that range from .78 to .87 for the five subscales and assume a value of .94 or .95 in the full scale, depending on the sample used (Betz et al., 2005). In the Portuguese version of the CDSE-SF, reliability with high school students ranges from .41 to .73 for the subscales, with a value for the full scale of .89 or .90 (Silva, Paixão, & Albuquerque, 2009). Recently, Miguel, Silva, and Prieto (2013), using Rasch analyses in a sample of Portuguese high school students, have obtained data showing that the 25 items of the CDSE-SF fit a latent unidimensional structure.

Procedures

Intervention in experimental and control groups

The intervention was performed at five public schools. One school was located in the Lisbon district, three in the Setúbal district and one in the district of Évora. Lisbon and Setúbal are coastal, industrial regions, while the district of Évora is a rural area located in the interior of the country. All of the 9th grade students of the Évora and Lisbon schools agreed to participate, while 93% of the Setúbal students did so. As for the 12th grade students, 72.7% of the Lisbon students participated, while in Setúbal and Évora the participation rates were 90.1% and 85.3%, respectively. The high rates of participation appear to be due to the tradition within these schools of students undergoing vocational guidance activities when preparing to transition to a higher level of study.

After the researchers received authorization from the school administrations, students were invited to participate in the activities on a voluntary basis. Information on the nature of the research was provided, and anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with each participant and his/her parents being required to sign a consent form. Given that not all volunteers agreed to participate in the focus groups, only students who participated in focus groups and their parents were required to sign a second informed consent form.

Classes were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group. Classes in the experimental group comprised eight to 10 students randomly selected from classes with 15 to 25 students. The remaining students from the selected classes were integrated into the control group. In both subsamples, the intervention was carried out in seven sessions, lasting 50 minutes each. While the experimental group participated in MCS sessions, the control group participated in citizenship education sessions.

In the experimental group, the first two sessions were focused on the first part of MCS, "Telling My Story;" the next three sessions comprised the second part, "Hearing my Story;" and

the last part, "Enacting My Story", was conducted in one session. All participants were given a

MCS workbook and were asked to perform the tasks described in it. The sessions began with a

discussion of the rationale for the tasks, an oral exploration of personal experiences, and,

subsequently, a more thorough exploration of personal experiences through the performance of

the tasks described in the MCS workbook.

Measures administration

Participants enrolled in both groups completed the pre-test measures one week before the

beginning of the program, and post-test questionnaires were completed one week after the last

MCS session. During data collection, which was performed by the researchers during class

hours, the voluntary nature of participation was re-emphasized. The measures were arranged in

four different orders, with approximately equal numbers of each arrangement in the final sample.

Focus group sessions

The focus group method was selected to assess participants' perceptions of the process

and outcome of MCS implementation. The focus group moderator was a Master's student. Her

main task was to ask four open-ended questions and facilitate the exchange of information

between participants (Patton, 2002). The questions were as follows: (a) Was the program

helpful? (b) How did you benefit from the program? (c)What types of tasks have been the most

helpful to you? (d) What difficulties did you experience in the performance of the tasks?

Focus groups were conducted with 6 subsets of the experimental groups (3 groups from

grade 9 and three groups from grade 12). All focus groups were conducted one week after the

final MCS session. Each focus group comprised five or six students because that number

sufficed to ensure a diversity of opinions. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 30

min, during which participants were allowed to consult their workbooks to facilitate recall of

their experiences with MCS. All focus groups were videotaped and transcribed verbatim by two graduate students.

Focus Group analyses

The analysis of the focus group data followed the Consensual Qualitative Research method (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The CQR is an inductive method, ideal for an in-depth description of participants' inner experiences. Moreover, its use allow the results to be comparable to those reported by Rehfuss et al. (2011), who used CQR in a study exploring adult perceptions of the impact of CCI on adults' career development.

The interview transcripts were analyzed by a team of researchers who look for consensual decisions. Initially, the first two authors analyzed independently all participants' focus group responses and defined domains corresponding to the four main questions of the interview protocol. Next, core ideas were identified and allocated to the corresponding domains. Discrepancies between categorizations were discussed until consensus was reached. In the identification of the core ideas, when a response included multiple components (e.g., "It was helpful because, even though I already knew what I want, it allowed me to discover other possibilities"), each component was coded. If a participant answered a particular question in the same way more than once, the response was counted only once. The categories' labels were established based on a critical review of the literature about career counseling process and outcome (Rehfuss et al., 2011; Whiston & Rahardja, 2008; Whiston & Rose, 2015). The auditor, the third author, reviewed core ideas and domains and provided feedback. Finally, a cross-analysis was performed to categorize core ideas according to grade level across all cases (Hill et al., 1997). As in the previous phases of data analysis, the outcomes agreed upon by the researchers were reviewed by an auditor. The suggestions made by the auditor were incorporated

if agreed upon by consensus, leading to a revised analysis. This process of triangulation was used to enhance trustworthiness of coding decisions (Patton, 2002; Hill et al., 1997).

Results

Data Analysis

Impact of the program on career variables

In the pre-test, there were no significant differences between participants from the experimental group and those from the control group (Table 1) on CMI-Adaptability, t (233) = -.08 p = .94; Career Certainty, t (233) = -1.01; p =. 31; or Career Self-Efficacy, t (233) = -.45; p =.65.

Insert Table 1

To test the significance of the program's impact on the experimental group, a factorial repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) (moments X groups X grade level) was conducted. The analysis revealed that the program had a significant effect on Career Certainty (F (1, 228) = 9.42; p = .002) and Career Self-Efficacy (F (1, 228) = 5.64; p = .02), although this effect was of small magnitude (η^2 = .039; η^2 = .024, respectively). By contrast, the analysis showed that the program had no effect on CMI-Career Adaptability (F (1, 228) = 0.23; p = .89, η^2 = .00). The interaction of grade level and group was considered statistically significant for Career Self-Efficacy (F (1, 228) = 4.86; p = .028, η^2 = .021).

Regarding the experimental group, means differences between grade 9 and grade 12 participants reveal that the program had a stronger effect on grade 12 students. Indeed, although grade 9 students showed significantly increased Career Certainty (M1= 15.39, M2 = 17.01, t = -2.72, p = .001) from the pre- to the post-intervention moment, grade 12 students significantly

increased their average levels of Career Adaptability (M1 = 10.79, M2 = 12.08, t = -5.87, p = .001), Career Certainty (M1 = 15.81, M2 = 18.81, t = -3.34, p = .001), and Career Self-Efficacy (M1 = 84.65, M2 = 94.04, t = -5.81, p = .001).

Focus group

The focus group domains and categories are presented in Table 2, in addition to group and individual frequencies. Following Hill et al. (2005), categories were considered general if they occurred in all cases, typical if they occurred in more than half of the cases, variant if they occurred in less than half but at least two cases, and rare if they occurred in only one or two cases. We added the frequency of groups that mentioned each category as a method of capturing the representativeness of the core idea in each focus group. Throughout the presentation of the results, illustrative quotes are identified by school level, group number, and participant number (e.g., "12, 5, LX" refers to grade 12, group 5, participant acronym LX).

Insert Table 2

Outcome evaluation

Considering the *Program usefulness* domain, participants rated the intervention useful with typical frequency. This type of response was observed in all groups. However, some participants did not consider the program useful, a result that appeared with variant frequency. One participant explained that the reason for this was "because I've already made up my mind" (9, 2, MB), whereas others remained indecisive even after the end of the intervention (e.g., "I'm still undecided", 9, 2, GA).

Regarding the *Program benefits* domain, participants reported, with typical frequency, that MCS gave *Direction*, which included references to gaining perspective on the direction in which they should be heading (e.g., ''It helped me decide what I want to be", 9, 2, GO) or

references to the construction of new career plans (e.g., ''I discovered other and equally interesting possibilities'', 12, 4, 5). This type of response was observed in all groups. The category, *Self-Discovery,* was observed in five groups, also with typical frequency. The participants emphasized the program benefits related to improving perceptions of their own skills and interests (e.g., "it helps us recognize our own skills," 9, 1, PC) and personality characteristics (e.g., "It helped me better understand what having a critical mind means and recognize myself as a persistent person", 9, 2, LB), in addition to self-knowledge in general (e.g., "I found myself", 9, 1, AF). The category, *Information,* which concerns the students' awareness of educational or occupational opportunities, was observed in five groups, with typical frequency (e.g., "Yes, I got to learn more about courses and occupations, although I already had some ideas." 12, 2, AO). The category *Connection* was noted with variant frequency in four groups. This category represents the contribution of MCS to promoting a sense of continuity among the past, the present, and the future (e.g., "it was important to relate what we thought when we were younger with what we think now", 9, 3, G) or to establishing relationships among personal experiences (e.g., "I liked the TV shows, books, and magazines because I believed they had no relationship, but they do", 12, 2, A). Finally, with variant frequency, participants from three groups reported that the program was useful in facilitating *Self-Awareness* of how MCS was beneficial for reflection (e.g., "it made me remember things I don't usually think about in daily life", 9, 1, MR) or to improve new understandings (e.g., "it helped me to understand my life motto more clearly", 9, 2, AMV).

Process evaluation

Considering the *Most helpful tasks* domain, participants from all six groups noted those corresponding to the second part of the intervention – "Hearing My Story" – with typical

frequency. Among them, participants from five groups noted, with variant frequency, the

Exploring Occupations task because it facilitated the identification of alternative occupations

(e.g., "I'm talking about the website (reference to o*net) that helps us find other occupations in

our field", 12, 2, AC) and increased the participants' awareness of educational and occupational

opportunities (e.g., "researching led me to better conclusions", 9, 1, AF). Additionally, the *Who*

Am I?/Who Am I Becoming? tasks, which induced the participants to reflect on the type of person

they want to be, were reported with variant frequency. The same was true in the case of the

Rewriting My Story task, in which participants were asked to rewrite their life stories based on

the tasks performed in the second part of MCS. Finally, the *Where do I like to be?* task was

considered useful by participants from two groups, with variant frequency. Regarding the four

above-mentioned tasks, participants reported having merely liked them (e.g., "I liked the table

with work settings and examples," 9, 3L). The set of tasks included in the first part of the

program – "Telling My Story" – was noted by three groups, with variant frequency. This result

corresponds to the *Heroes* task, in which the participants were asked to name individuals whom

they admired in the past, and the *Mottos* task, in which the participants had to define their life

mottos. None of the participants provided a rationale for their choices (e.g., "I liked the part on

heroes", 12, 3, A).

      With variant frequency, the participants from the two groups noted the importance of

Counselor Collaboration, which was expressed in the categories of *Support* and *Challenging*.

Support was perceived in the explanations provided by the counselors and in their attitude of

acceptance (e.g., "The effort that the psychologist made with us… because she looks on the

positive side of things, she talks to us gently. I liked it, she's very sensitive", 9, 3, L). The

participants also noted the *Challenging* role when the counselor supported the deepening of their

ideas (e.g., "Yes, the counselor goes deeper into stuff that sometimes we're not even aware of",

9, 3, GO).

With regard to the *Difficult tasks* domain, participants from five focus groups noted the

category *Self-Narration*, with typical frequency. Self-narration difficulties were related to

difficulties in self-reflection (e.g., "Writing about something external is already difficult, and

even more so when it's about ourselves", 9, 2, A) and in thought expression (e.g., "This is

difficult because we need to be introspective, to think about things that never crossed our minds

before", 12, 1, A). In turn, the *Heroes*, *Work Settings* (variant), and *Mottos* (rare) tasks and the

Overall Understanding of Tasks (rare) posed less difficulty.

Differences in process evaluation according to grade level

To analyze differences in process evaluation according to participants' grade levels, we

followed the suggestion of Hill et al. (2005) to only consider "findings that differ by at least two

frequency categories (e.g., general vs. variant)" (p. 201), thus avoiding the risk of interpreting

non-relevant occurrences of the outcomes. Using this criterion, we found that the differences

between the two subsamples were not relevant, given that they only occurred in the *Difficult*

tasks domain, in which the category *Self-Narration* was typically noted by the students in grade 9

and rarely by grade 12 students.

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Discussion

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LDC-based career interventions have been the subject of several studies; however, all of

them were conducted in individual (Cardoso et al, 2014a;b; Rehfuss et al., 2011; Cardoso et al.,

2016) or group counseling with adults (Di Fabio & Maree, 2011). The present study extended the

research on LDC to adolescents through an analysis of the process and outcomes of a MCS

intervention targeting students in grades 9 and 12.

The study was divided into two complementary stages. In stage one, the effectiveness of the program in promoting career adaptability, vocational certainty, and vocational self-efficacy was assessed. In stage two, the participants' perceptions of the process and outcomes of the MCS intervention were analyzed.

The comparison of outcomes before and after the intervention (total sample) showed that the level of vocational development increased significantly in the experimental group. This finding shows evidence of MCS effectiveness in the development of vocational certainty and vocational self-efficacy, therefore corroborating its potential for interventions with groups of adolescents. This result is in line with those reported by Di Fabio and Maree (2011), showing the effectiveness of group-based Life Design Counseling in decreasing career decision-making difficulties and in increasing career decision-making self-efficacy. In addition, it is also in line with the results reported in several studies that demonstrate the efficacy of group programs in the development of competencies for vocational decision-making in school settings (Brown & Krane, 2000; Obi, 2015; Whiston & Quinby, 2009).

Contrary to initial expectations, results of the present study indicate that the program did not have a significant effect on career adaptability development. Results also revealed differences on the impact of the program according to participants' grade levels. Whereas grade 9 students exhibited improvement only in vocational certainty levels, grade 12 students exhibited a more marked development in all variables measured.

The poorer efficacy of MCS in enhancing career adaptability may be due to the intervention focus on life story reconstruction rather than on tasks encouraging the development of other aspects of adaptability. This explanation is derived from the results of other LDC-based

programs (Janeiro et al., 2014) that showed beneficial effects on the development of career adaptability among adolescents.

The results obtained from the focus groups complement the results from the quantitative analysis, contributing to the above-mentioned explanations. With typical frequency, the participants in the focus groups stated that MCS was useful and that its benefits were related to the promotion of *direction*, *self-discovery*, *information*, *connection*, and s*elf-awareness*. These findings are in line with those obtained in a study conducted with adults, applying the same intervention model for face-to-face career counseling (Rehfuss et al., 2011). Therefore, the similar perceptions concerning the intervention's benefits, expressed by participants in both studies, underscore the focus of face-to-face LDC and MCS on the construction of narrative identity and on the support provided to individuals to think of themselves in relation to social roles (Savickas, 2011).

The evidence that not all participants in the focus groups considered MCS effective is in line with the findings showing a non-significant progression in all criterion variables, which points to the need to complement MCS with other approaches that take the specific characteristics of adolescent students into consideration.

Regarding the counseling process, participants in the focus groups referred to the tasks performed in the second part of the program as being the most useful, that is, those tasks promoting *Self-discovery, Information,* and *Direction*, thus making possible the rewriting of narrative identity. This finding, in line with the result related to the intervention's benefits, shows that participants considered the tasks that afford greater benefits to be the most useful. These tasks include those related to occupational exploration, which may be explained by the fact that tasks of this type meet participants' needs both to crystallize career plans and for individuation.

In other words, as adolescents face career transitions that demand the crystallization of their

vocational aspirations (Savickas, 2002; Super, 1990), identifying possible occupations is

important for the establishment of an educational path that will provide access to the desired

work role (Savickas, 2002).

The other tasks that participants considered useful illustrate the importance and

complementarity between tasks focused on the awareness of core preoccupations (*Who am

I?/Who am I becoming?*, *Re-Writing my Story*) and tasks that center on the search for resolutions

to such concerns (*Where do I like to be?*). This relationship between problem definition and the

search for solutions is also present in the tasks included in the first part of the program, which the

participants rated to be the most useful. These included *Heroes,* which refers to the expression of

concerns and solutions, and *Mottos*, which denotes the search for solutions (Savickas, 2011).

This pattern points to the impact that tasks of this type may have on two dimensions of crucial

significance for rewriting narrative identity: concern clarification and solution construction.

Given that MCS aims to facilitate life-themes description for self-construction (Savickas &

Hartung, 2012), the results related to participants' perception of intervention usefulness are

indicators of the effectiveness of MCS.

Participants from two focus groups also emphasized the supporting and challenging roles

of the counselor. Although this finding was observed in a small number of focus groups, it

suggests that the quality of the relationship between counselor and participants was important to

the intervention's effectiveness in those groups. This result also underscores the relevance of

working alliances in manual-based interventions, such as MCS. Moreover, this finding is in

accord with research in career counseling and psychotherapy, showing the importance of work

alliances to achieving good outcomes (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Masdonati, Perdrix, Massoudi &

Rossier, 2013; Norcross & Goldfried, 2005; Whiston & Rahardja, 2008) and the importance of establishing a sensitive balance of support and challenge to ensuring the quality of therapeutic collaboration (Cardoso, Taveira, Biscaia & Santos, 2012; Scaturo, 2005).

Finally, participants from almost all groups indicated perceiving *Self-narration* as being the most difficult task. This finding may be explained by the participants' age range, 13 to 18 years, a time in life when individuals develop the cognitive abilities necessary for autobiographical thinking, such as (a) the establishment of causal links between biographical events, the self, and personal development; (b) the ability to relate globally coherent life narratives; and (c) the acquisition of cultural knowledge about normative aspects of life (Habermas et al., 2009).

Heroes was rated as being not only a useful task but also a difficult one, with variant frequency. Although, in our counseling experience, we have found that this task is difficult for individuals in general, it might be even more difficult for adolescents. During adolescence, references to admired figures may be perceived as threatening to autonomy, thus generating resistance to the intervention (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 1995). The *Work Settings* task was noted in one single focus group, with variant frequency, which may be explained by specific characteristics of participants or of the intervention process in that group.

Differences in results corresponding to participant grade level include the difficulty of *Self-narration*, which was typical in students in grade 9 and rare in grade 12 students. This finding reinforces the aforementioned explanation regarding the influence of the participants' levels of psychosocial development on the performance of MCS tasks. It also provides a second explanation for the grade 12 students' significant development of vocational certainty, career self-efficacy and career adaptability relative to that of grade 9 participants. The grade 12

students' greater development of cognitive abilities facilitates the construction of narrative identity by reducing the difficulty of describing self-experience, and consequently allows more significant changes in the criterion measures.

Limitations and future research

One limitation results from a few generic responses given by participants to questions in some categories, which did not allow a more thorough understanding of the intervention. This limitation may essentially be due to the difficulty that participants had in imagining themselves as observers of their own experiences and to the difficulty of narrating such experiences.

The study was also limited by the non-use of qualitative measures of narrative transformation to assess intervention outcomes. Given that the goal of MCS is to enhance the capacity for autobiographical narrative, using this type of measures might improve the fit between outcome assessment and intervention. Thus, future studies would benefit from assessing the impact of MCS by combining the use of quantitative evaluation of the outcome with qualitative assessment.

Implications for practice

The participants' verbal descriptions of the intervention process and outcome suggest several implications for MCS group intervention with adolescents. First, they point to the need to complement this approach with other practices that respond to the difficulties of participants who do not benefit from MCS. Second, they indicate a need to use MCS in a flexible manner, in which counselors are attentive to the specific thoughts and feelings of participants and in which there is a sensitive balance between how much to support or to challenge the participants in facilitating the construction of meaning. The third suggestion for practice relates to the difficulties that younger participants face in narrating their experiences. To overcome this

particular difficulty, we propose that, with grade 9 students, groups should not be too large, allowing counselors to provide individualized support for overcoming difficulties in task performance. Finally, the non-significant changes of participant's career adaptability point to the need for an increased focus in this dimension of career development. In this sense, deserve special attention the first session focused in student's definition of the problem and their expectations for the intervention as well as the last session focused in career goals definition and the identification of resources for their implementation. The increased focus in these sessions could benefit the development of career adaptability dimensions such as concern and consultation, respectively.

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