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## The influence of group life-design-based counselling on learners' academic self-construction: A collective case study

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The purpose of this study was to explore how life-design-based counselling can influence young learners' academic self-construction within a group context. The study involved a qualitative mode of enquiry with 12 participants. Life-design-based intervention strategies, together with various (postmodern) qualitative techniques, were used to gather data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and identify themes and sub-themes. The findings indicate that the participants exhibited enhanced academic self-construction in general after the intervention. More specifically, they displayed improved future aspirations as they made sense of their current learning. Future research could assess the feasibility and value of life-design counselling as early as the primary school years, as it seems to hold numerous benefits for young individuals that may positively influence their life-long career development.

**Keywords:** academic self-construction; career counselling; career development; early childhood; life-design-based counselling; school guidance

### Introduction

The career development process is not a separate process that needs to be delayed to secondary school age, rather it should be realised from a very young age. It has been well documented that although children are uncertain about making future career decisions so early in life, one would be naive to think that these initial choices are not important, as career development is important throughout the entire human life-span (Brown & Lent, 2012; Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1990). It is crucial to emphasise the importance of "completing developmental tasks proficiently in childhood to motivate young people to set and realize specific goals, make meaning in their lives, and pursue purpose" (Maree, 2018b:437). Other sources that emphasise the significance of advocating the need for early career counselling include Hartung, Porfeli and Vondracek (2005), as well as Watson and McMahon (2005), who conclude that progress made during different stages of early childhood career development affects the choices that children make about the world of work and it also ensures their identity development and interpersonal growth.

As young learners make sense of future aspirations, and integrate career-related information, they can be assisted as they enhance their academic progress and remain occupied in and engaged with education (Hooley, 2014). When young learners are provided with the necessary career guidance they are empowered to make appropriate career decisions, which will in turn enable them to appreciate the role that their current learning plays in these decisions. By making learners aware of future career aspirations and goals, they may be inspired to construct themselves more appropriately and re-consider perceptions and behaviours regarding schooling.

Career counselling can hold major benefits for individuals' understanding of themselves, their careers and the world of work, and it helps them to make important occupational, educational and life decisions (Watson & McMahon, 2017), which further emphasise the importance of providing this essential support and guidance as early as possible to benefit the lives of young people.

### Life-Design Framework

Life-design counselling draws on, integrates, and implements the theories of self-construction (Guichard, 2005) and career construction (Savickas, 2005). This framework emphasises that as individuals construct their identities, their knowledge is based on their interactions within their social contexts and they extract meaning from these interactions through discourse. Life design emphasises the key importance of subjective aspects of career counselling. By means of discourse, the unique needs and demands of individuals' careers are narrated and they reflect on their career stories which shape their work roles. The focus is on collaboration and co-construction as individuals make meaning of their lives and take action to pursue their goals. The role of the counsellor is to provide support to clients as they formulate the subjective identity in their own words (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck & Van Vianen, 2009). Life design re-authors the narrative identity and provides an opportunity and new possibilities for self-construction, as narrative techniques can provide opportunities for people to realise their values and life purpose. Life-design counselling empowers people to actively participate in their own career development (Sethare-Meltor & Wood, 2016). The life-design counselling framework (Savickas et al., 2009) aims to increase individuals' adaptability and addresses change and narratability, which in turn emphasises continuity. Life-design counselling is based on social constructionism, which is used as a meta-theory for reconceptualising vocational personality and establishing subjective careers and career identity (Savickas, 2005). Therefore, life-design counselling is

structured to be lifelong, holistic, contextual, and preventive (Maree, 2009, 2017; Savickas et al., 2009). Life-design counselling methods allow for multiple and alternative ways of interpreting life experiences. They provide numerous opportunities for the client to gain new insights and perspectives that can be utilised to re-construct their lives

(Savickas et al., 2009).

The life-design framework implemented in this intervention study consisted of six steps (see Table 1) which were utilised to encourage the participants to make meaningful sense of their early career development based on their own unique personal experiences and perceptions.

**Table 1** Outline of the six steps of the life-design-based intervention (adapted from Maree 2009, 2018a, 2018b and Savickas et al., 2009)

Steps	Description and objective	Activities and techniques	Outcomes
Step 1	Defining the problem and establishing goals which the client hopes to achieve.	The specific counselling goals were co-constructed. A working alliance was established and a transition narrative was elicited. Pre-intervention focus group interview: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can I be of use, help or value to you?</li> <li>• What are your goals?</li> <li>• What are your dreams?</li> <li>• What are you hoping to gain from these exercises?</li> </ul> Definition of participants' objectives.	Participants were regarded as the experts on their own experiences.  Personal meanings were ascribed to prospective future professions.
Step 2	Exploring the current system of subjective identity forms. Reflection and shaping of the subjective story.	The <i>Career Interest Profile (CIP)</i> (see section below) (part 1 and 2) was administered. i. Biographical information, ii. family influences, and iii. occupational information (career education).  The <i>CIP</i> (part 3 and 4) was administered. i. Five most and ii. least preferred career choices (vocational guidance).  Critical reflections and journal writing.	The <i>CIP</i> supported the participants as they progressed through self- and career construction.  The participants next continued to narrate their subjective life stories ( <i>CIP</i> ). Establishment of a clear sense of self:  By means of co-construction, participants' idiosyncratic (unique and personal) characteristics had to be reflected in their life stories. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The major themes or patterns in your life story would be....</li> </ul> Self-construction, academic self-construction, and career construction could be observed and was enhanced.
Step 3	Opening the client's perspectives by narrating the stories to be more objective-focused.	Portfolio activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draw a life line. Who am I?</li> </ul> Empowering narrations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think you are learning about yourself?</li> <li>• What is important to you?</li> <li>• What do you enjoy?</li> </ul> What are your interests?	Facilitation and discussions of subjective identity forms.
Step 4	Putting the problem in a new perspective by placing it in a new story.	Life story: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "What are the headings and sub-headings of my future life story?"</li> </ul> Drawing on the information obtained during the previous steps/activities ( <i>CIP</i> , interviews, lifelines),	Participants were helped to co-construct novel, respectful career-life stories and to make meaning of their stories. Identification of unique strengths. Realisation of desired identities and how these relate to newly defined career aspirations.
Step 5	Crafting out a plan of activities to try and actualise this identity.	Telling the new story and specifying activities that could be converted into concrete action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A collage on the new actualised identity: "Who am I?" and "What shaped me?"</li> </ul> Interpretation of newly constructed career aspirations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we reach these goals?</li> <li>• What advice do you have for yourself?</li> </ul>	Steps/action taken to promote academic self-construction: crystallisation, specification, and actualisation (Savickas et al., 2009). These "actions" included finding meaning in their studies (e.g. understanding the relevance of what they are learning now); accepting the need to work harder; realising that their futures were created by what they were doing now (e.g. devoting themselves and persevering in daily scholastic activities). Participants needed to regulate their learning, work according to their true potential, and sustain effort in tasks at hand, such as homework. They also had to work towards aspired future careers. Participants were made aware of the interplay between self-efficacy, self-regulated learning, and outcomes/reaching their goals. They reflected on the effect of their subjective identity forms by considering factors such as helping others, etc.

Steps	Description and objective	Activities and techniques	Outcomes
Step 6	Long-term and short-term follow-up.	Follow-up and closure and post-intervention interview	The purpose was to mobilise the participants to take the steps that are necessary to achieve stipulated life goals (as negotiated by them and the primary researcher). Summary and critical reflections on outcomes and findings. Reflection and answer on step 1 of the intervention: "How can I be of use to you today?"

*The Career Interest Profile (CIP) (Maree, 2017)*

The *Career Interest Profile (CIP)* (Version 6) (Maree, 2017) gathers qualitative (storied) information regarding career choice-making in addition to traditional (quantitative) information. It is based on the work of scholars such as Adler (1958), Hartung (2015), Jung (1977), and, especially, Savickas (2005) and aims to promote qualitative (career) counselling. The *CIP* was selected as qualitative method as it provides insight into how individuals interpret their interests, potential, and career values. The questionnaire enables participants to identify their major life themes in collaboration with the counsellor. It also helps participants to familiarise themselves with different career categories. In the current intervention, the exposure aimed to open up the world of work to participants, as the vast majority of them had extremely limited prior exposure. As

they progressed through the different activities stipulated in the *CIP*, they were helped to construct their career aspirations, identify potential career options, and clarify their identities. They were continually encouraged to reflect on how their current life stories, values, and interests relate to their future aspirations and career goals, as the *CIP* helps individuals to identify, discuss, and analyse possible career-life themes and career-related challenges while they reflect on their own stories (Maree, 2018a).

The *CIP* comprises four parts designed to help people identify their a) central life themes, b) career interests, issues, and concerns, and c) their own advice from within regarding how to convert challenges (“problems”) and concerns into themes of inspiration and hope that can bolster their individual life projects (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Description of the *CIP* (Maree, 2017)

Part	Information gathered	Related career counselling paradigm (Savickas, 2018)	Theoretical foundation
1	i. Biographical information, ii. family influences, and iii. occupational information	Career education	Developmental
2	i. Five most and ii. five least preferred career choices	Vocational guidance	Differential
3	Six career-choice questions.		Differential
4	Fifteen narrative (life story) questions	Career counselling	Developmental and storied

**Academic Self-Construction**

Young learners need to develop a positive self-awareness as they become active explorers of professions and grow more knowledgeable about aspired careers – and ultimately about their futures. As they develop these crucial skills, attitudes, aspirations and values, they may become more aware of the value of their current learning and how this influences their prospects of achieving desired goals. During these formative years, learners need to be supported in their journey of discovery, of ambitions and aspirations, and they need to learn what these may hold for them as they move to more advanced stages of career development (Super, 1994).

Exploring academic self-construction was an important factor in addressing the primary research question of this study (see below). Young learners' academic self-construction was evaluated to determine how they were able to construct themselves in terms of *academic* experiences, perceptions, behaviours, activities, motivation and achievements. The term relies on the self-construction theory of Guichard (2005) where people (learners, in the context of this study) construct their subjective identity according to their academic endeavours. As self-construction develops, learners are likely to feel more inclined towards academic performance and align their

attitudes, motivation and efforts towards academic attainment.

Learners can be supported by means of different life-design activities to determine how they could make meaning of their lives and establish a sense of life purpose (Guichard, 2009; Maree, 2013; Savickas, 2018). Different experiences and environmental factors can be analysed, discussed and interpreted to help them make decisions about what drives and motivates them, especially regarding academic self-construction, and also how the afore-mentioned influences prospective career aspirations. Narrative stories are elicited that could shed light on young learners' academic self-construction and bolster their academic functioning through self- and career construction counselling. When learners use narratives and stories to ascribe meaning to personal experiences, their sense of self is expected to develop, which can contribute to their academic self-construction and enhance their career-related ambitions.

Promoting career development programmes and providing opportunities for linking learners' school curriculum and current learning correlated positively with their future career choice and aspirations during the primary school years (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt & Silva, 1998; Seligman, Weinstock & Heflin, 1991; Watts, 1996). By

becoming more aware of career goals and of the importance of dedication and commitment towards attainment of these goals, individuals are more likely to actively engage in educational activities and tasks that are regarded as important in realising their aspirations and goals (Turner & Lapan, 2012). There is a need to emphasise and make young learners aware of how their learning provides opportunities for actualising their future career aspirations (Watson & McMahan, 2007).

Participants in this study participated in different life-design-based activities<sup>i</sup> during which they could reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, role models, daily experiences, career choices, values, self-efficacious beliefs and their subjective identities. All of these factors contributed to their early career development, and by means of a reciprocal relationship, also to their academic self-construction.

### Goal of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and assess the feasibility of life-design-based counselling and the influence thereof on the academic self-construction of Grade 7 learners. The following questions guided the research:

The primary research questions were:

- What is the influence of group life-design-based counselling on grade 7 learners' academic self-construction?
- How did Grade 7 learners experience the group life-design-based counselling intervention executed in the

current study?

### Method

#### Research Design

Intervention research (Rothman & Thomas, 1994) based on life-design counselling was conducted using a qualitative mode of inquiry.

#### Participants and Context

Non-probability sampling was utilised as it is known to be an efficient sampling method in educational settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Twelve participants from a public school based in Pretoria, where the language of teaching is Afrikaans and the vast majority of participants are white and Afrikaans-speaking, were purposefully selected as they were conveniently accessible and they represented specific characteristics of interest to the research topic and questions. These learners, who constituted a fairly homogeneous group based on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, and demographics, were purposely selected to include nine representatives from the Afrikaans, two from the English, as well one from the small African-language speaking group. While the majority of learners hailed from a middle-class background, the rest hailed from a high middle-class background. Specific description is provided in Table 3. This study was a group-based intervention and the duration of the study was 6 weeks (comprising seven sessions).

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics of the participants

Participant descriptor	Age	Descriptive		
		Gender	Mother tongue	Ethnicity
Participant 1	12 years and 10 months	Male	Afrikaans	Coloured
Participant 2	13 years and 6 months	Male	Afrikaans	White
Participant 3	13 years and 1 month	Male	English	White
Participant 4	12 years and 10 months	Male	English	Indian
Participant 5	13 years and 10 months	Male	Afrikaans	White
Participant 6	13 years and 3 months	Male	Afrikaans	White
Participant 7	13 years and 0 months	Female	Afrikaans	White
Participant 8	12 years and 6 months	Female	Xhosa/Afrikaans	Black
Participant 9	13 years and 0 months	Female	Afrikaans	White
Participant 10	12 years and 11 months	Female	Afrikaans	White
Participant 11	12 years and 7 months	Female	Afrikaans	White
Participant 12	12 years and 6 months	Female	Afrikaans	White

### Data Generation

A number of qualitative data-gathering techniques were used, including interviews, observations, and documents. Furthermore, post-modern qualitative data generation techniques, as well as life-design counselling methods (Savickas et al., 2009) were also used to gather data to be analysed. The techniques primarily included the *CIP* (Maree, 2017), as well as portfolio activities (collages and life lines), written reflections, journal entries, pre- and post-intervention group interviews and

discussions.

### Summary of the group life-design-based intervention

The intervention consisted of seven sessions where the duration of each session was approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The sessions were held in a classroom at the school. The intervention was presented over the course of 6 weeks with one session a week,<sup>ii</sup> which started in May 2019 and concluded in June 2019.

Procedure  
Table 4 reflects the sequential steps used to

generate data, as well as the planned activities as set out in the qualitative intervention.

**Table 4** Data generation plan

Data generation sequence	Planned activities/ techniques
Step 1	Welcoming, orientation and informal pre-intervention group interview
Step 2	Journal writing and critical reflections/discussions.
Step 3	Administering of the <i>CIP</i> (part 1 and 2)
Step 4	Administering of the <i>CIP</i> (part 3 and 4)
Step 5	Portfolio activities (life lines)
Step 6	Narrating the life-story (revisit previous activities and different sections in the <i>CIP</i> )
Step 7	Portfolio activities (collages)
Step 8	Follow-up and closure <sup>iii</sup> and post-intervention interview

**Data Analysis**

We used Thematic Analysis, as discussed by Clarke and Braun (2013) as data analysis method. Themes were developed to answer the research questions, and relationships, similarities and differences were noted in the data. By means of various processes, numerous themes and sub-themes were actively developed and constructed, which were guided by the research questions. Thematic data analysis is a highly flexible approach that provides core skills for conducting qualitative analysis and can produce trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six-phase model with different steps, was used to analyse the data. The following six steps of thematic analysis as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006) were executed: 1) Becoming familiar with the data; 2) Coding; 3) Searching for themes; 4) Reviewing the themes and identifying sub-themes; 5) Defining and naming of themes; 6) Writing up a report. Numerous patterns within data sets could be identified and analysed to successfully answer the specific research questions, and enough data were gathered to justify the themes that were generated.

**Ethical Issues**

Throughout the study, confidentiality and

anonymity remained the highest priority and an attempt was made to protect the participants from any potential harm. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and they could withdraw at any time if they wished to do so. To ensure that the proposed study was ethically sound, informed consent was obtained from all the participants' legal guardians. Throughout the study an attempt was made to maintain the trustworthiness of the findings by means of thorough consultation between the researcher and the supervisor. Participants were given opportunity to verify the outcomes of the qualitative data. The research was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

**Findings**

The post-modern qualitative data generation technique used yielded specific themes associated with the participants' lived experiences, their past and current career development, their future career aspirations and, ultimately, the influence this had on their academic self-construction. Four main themes emerged, including numerous corresponding sub-themes. Table 5 gives an indication of the relevant themes and sub-themes which were identified primarily according to an inductive approach.

**Table 5** Summary of themes and sub-themes

Main themes	Sub-themes
<u>Theme 1:</u> Early career development facets	Self-exploration Career exploration Perceived barriers Lived experiences
<u>Theme 2:</u> The role of significant others – related facets	Family influences Role models Peer group influences
<u>Theme 3:</u> The role of education and how learners construct themselves accordingly	Self-construction Academic self-construction Career construction
<u>Theme 4:</u> Sense of control	Self-regulation Self-efficacy

Below, responses are provided to promote and substantiate participants' perceptions and

reflections. These responses are also summarised in Table 6 below.

### Early Career Development Facets

#### Brief description

Counsellors can assist learners in their career development by engaging them in a broad array of career-related experiences, which in turn can uncover their unique career interests. As learners participate in various experiences, key early career development facets are addressed (Collin & Guichard, 2011; Guichard, 2005, 2009).

#### Self-exploration

*Something between a chemical and mechanical engineer, because I once succeeded in taking a motor from another toy and building a remote control car on my own. I love experimenting with this stuff and it is really interesting (E;3).<sup>iv</sup>*

#### Career exploration

*I want to become a mechanical or electric engineer, because I love to fix things. I also like programming and electricity fascinates me, as I like to discover exactly how it works (A;3;1;24–26).*

#### Perceived barriers

*Oh my goodness, I am going to actually need Mathematics (F;6;1;28); and They really want me to keep on singing and I want to, but I will have to practice a lot more. I can only get my first laptop in Grade 10 (B1;7).*

#### Lived experiences

*It is actually interesting how things currently around us already influences our future. How everything from friends, academics, sport and life aspirations guides you towards your future goals (G;2;1;13–15).*

### The Role of Significant Others – Related Facets

#### Brief description

As young individuals engage in career exploration, many authors have found that “career development learning occurs through recursive interaction between individuals and the influences in their lives” (McMahon & Rixon, 2007:40). The participants in this study discussed the influential role of significant others in their career development as they investigated future career aspirations.

#### Family influences

*My dad inspired me to go into the business world. He works hard and never gives up. The reason why I want to become that is because my dad inspired me and he is already proceeding towards his next business degree. (E;1)*

#### Role models

One participant referred to Elon Musk as his role model: “He gets hold of a specific idea and then he

*does everything in his power to achieve his goals” (B1;2).*

#### Peer group influences

*What about you also widen your horizon by looking into travelling to different countries to source your exclusive materials ... you know, for your couches and curtains, and pillows? Remember you said that you also used to consider becoming a travel agent in order to see the world? (G;12;2;44–48)*

(This question was posed by a research participant.)

### The Role of Education and How Learners Construct Themselves Accordingly

#### Brief description

Education and current academic endeavours can and will have a profound impact on future career goals and aspirations. As the participants found themselves in an educational context most of the time, much of their current experiences related to the influence of education on their daily (and future) lives.

#### Self-construction

*I am a person with many talents; someone with a very small, sensitive heart. I try to be myself and not to compare myself with others. I am different from others and I prefer being in my own company. I am inclined to be distrustful of people (don't trust others readily). A lover of everything that has anything to do with music and writing, I put my trust in God. (B2;7)*

#### Academic self-construction

*I decided that I definitely want to become a CA [Chartered Accountant]. I want to do even better this term and have set my goals (F;10;2;51–53).*

#### Career construction

*My dream career is to become a business owner of a large company. I can become that because I will do anything in my power to get there (B1;3).*

#### Sense of Control

##### Brief description

Children realise the importance of making plans to achieve their future career goals. As they gain sufficient information, develop interests and a time perspective, and gain a sense of control over their futures, they reach the last phase of planning and decision making (Super, 1994).

#### Self-regulation

*I will take all my classwork seriously, concentrate, don't take so many days off and stay focused on my long-term goals (E;1).*

#### Self-efficacy

*For the first time I actually believe in myself and I also came to believe that I really can, and will be able, to do this (F;6;1;9–10).*



**Table 6** Summary of findings and themes and sub-themes of the pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews

Main theme	Subtheme	Pre-intervention theme Pre-intervention status <sup>v</sup>	Post-intervention theme Emergent theme
Early career development facets	Self-exploration	Learners found it difficult to talk about themselves. Personal characteristics, preferences, etc. were sections that they found difficult to answer. Introspection led to uncertainty and hesitation.	An increased sense of self.
	Career exploration	Learners shared ideas around possible careers they thought they would be interested in or good at. It was evident that learners were not sure and needed to explore further.	Clear, descriptive expressions on career aspirations and confirmation of effective career exploration.
	Perceived barriers	Learners' expressions on barriers indicated that they may feel that these barriers can't be overcome.	A realisation that possible barriers can be overcome by identifying and exploring them.
	Lived experiences	The learners weren't really aware of the effect of current experiences on future career aspirations.	A definite realisation that current, lived experiences already have an impact on future career aspirations.
The role of significant others – related facets	Family influences	Most learners indicated that they regarded their parents' input regarding careers fundamental, although they did not really have constructive discussions regarding careers with their parents.	Learners indicated that after having directed discussions on careers with their parents, they felt much more assured, orientated and motivated.
	Role models	Learners needed to determine their own unique aspirations and recognise the specific characteristics they were striving for in order to be able to identify with role models.	An increase in the identification of and association with specific role models.
	Peer group influences	Learners did not realise the influence of peers on their aspired careers, although they were aware of how they felt inspired by others' achievements.	Learners appreciated and considered positive input from peers.
The role of education and how learners construct themselves accordingly	Self-construction	Learners found it challenging to realise and/or express their unique sense of self and had to really engage in defining the self.	An increase in sense of self.
	Academic self-construction	Learners weren't completely aware that academic self-construction had profound implications for their futures. They needed to realise the personal meaning of current educational perceptions and attitudes and how it could shape aspired careers.	Increased academic self-construction.
	Career construction	Initially, learners weren't able to link their subjective identities, their hopes and dreams, and their aspired careers with each other as they did not grasp the interrelatedness. (Observations made during the pre-intervention group interview and initial stages of the CIP.)	Co-construction of subjective careers was evident.
Sense of control	Self-regulation	A need for learners to realise that they need to self-regulate their behaviours and attitudes to reach their goals, were necessary.	A definite realisation on the importance of self-regulation. Learners identified definite actions to be taken.
	Self-efficacy	Some learners expressed negative beliefs about their capabilities and some did not realise the effect of self-efficacy in the attainment of desired outcomes.	An increase in beliefs in perceived capabilities.

Since this article can only provide a small number of examples of observations made by the participants, the following elaboration on the findings can be presented:

In this study, the emphasis was on the *early* career development phase. Participants (young learners) were exposed to a career-related intervention that allowed them to explore many facets relating to career development. As the research proceeded, it was evident that as the learners' sense of self developed, so did their self-

concept and awareness, while they participated in the activities generated by the CIP. The learners reflected on, listened to their personal strengths and talents being recounted, and crafted their personal life stories. These young learners became more assertive and could express their positive traits and capabilities as they progressed through the different sections. As the participants linked past and current experiences to their aspirations, their self-confidence and efficacy improved, which also

had a positive influence on their sense of self and self-construction.

During the post-intervention stage it was observed that the learners were aware that they were exploring their inner selves and gaining self-knowledge. This perspective on an enhanced sense of self and self-awareness is supported by the findings that emerged during the post-intervention interview where the participants indicated how much they gained personally upon completion of the intervention activities. The participants were able to relate to future professions and aspirations as they explored and became aware of their own behaviours, dreams, feelings and motivations, which corresponded with their true selves.

By means of the intervention, the participants participated in various activities that clearly sparked their interests to explore different careers and gain detailed career information. The need to explore career information was noticed already after the first sessions of the career intervention, as learners returned with detailed explanations of what they wanted to achieve, as well as a better understanding of what certain career categories entailed.

The post-modern techniques used in this study displayed and addressed personal perceptions of learners (which resulted from certain experiences), and their connection with their prospective careers. The participants were also intrigued when they realised how their everyday lives were already preparing them for and shaping their future career objectives. They came to realise that the experiences that they were confronted with influenced how they made meaning of their lives and also navigated how they thought about the world of work.

The findings also emphasise the value of career learning experiences and opportunities that teachers provide for their learners. This includes supporting learners to acquire new skills (applicable and relevant to aspired careers) and also reinforcing specific talents that may have otherwise been overlooked.

During this research intervention, the participants were supported to realise the relationship between their current educational efforts and accomplishments on the one hand and their aspired careers on the other hand. They became aware of how their current learning and achievements already influenced how they thought about the world of work, their aspired career choices, and also the relevance of academic achievement to future career-related aspects. The participants had an opportunity to participate in an intervention where they could link their future with their school and current learning. They became aware of their present perceptions, activities and schooling and the relevance thereof in their future lives. The steps or actions taken for academic self-

construction could be observed and identified during the course of this life-design intervention. The participants were supported as they constructed their subjective identity forms in accordance with their academic perceptions, attributes, motivation, attitudes, skills, knowledge, self-efficacy, and achievements. They made meaning of different experiences and decided to bolster their academic functioning through self- and career-construction counselling. The findings in this study emphasise the need to make young learners aware of how their learning provides opportunities for actualising their future career aspirations. As participants interpreted various ascribed activities in the life-design-based intervention outlined in this research study, they revealed a positive change in perception regarding self-regulated behaviours and the latter's influence on their sense of control over their learning. The participants evaluated their behaviour regarding learning and school performance as they felt motivated when they found that their self-regulation capabilities and behaviours could give them a sense of control in reaching their career aspirations.

The participants reflected on their unique skills, abilities, qualities and strengths which influenced their beliefs about their capacity to achieve goals and fulfil aspirations. As they integrated the information as set out in the respective life-design-based activities, an increase in their self-efficacious beliefs could be facilitated and observed. The participants reflected on their strengths, successes and personal experiences, and subsequently exhibited an enhanced sense of self-efficacy. Participants' reflections indicated that they felt more inspired to work harder towards achieving their goals. They mentioned how they would work harder and put in more effort (regulating their learning behaviour) to ensure that they reached their desired outcomes and reached their goals. At the end of the intervention, the participants articulated the necessary steps/actions that they planned to take to ensure that they realise their career objectives and fulfil their purpose in life. Their enhanced perceptions regarding efficacy beliefs provided the necessary impetus for enacting their goals further.

We noted differences among participants from different socio-economic backgrounds, which are here elaborated on. Participants who came from a family with a good financial standing felt more motivated and confident about their futures. Their goals were already a little clearer and they felt more positive/assertive about reaching their goals. To provide an example: *"My parents inspire me as they believe in me and provide for all opportunities. I look up at how extremely hard they work and all that they have achieved. They inspire and help me to become successful and achieve my hopes."* This participant's socio-economic context

was more favourable. He had very specific goals and he mentioned how his parents would continually be able to provide all the necessary opportunities to ensure his career goals are actualised. However, a different participant mentioned how she most likely would not be able to reach her goals and would have to settle for other career choices as she was faced with specific barriers: *“I have changed my occupation choice after talking with my mother.” “She says I cannot become a singer.” “I don’t want to do what she does”* (F;7;1;42–44). This participant came from a background where her father had been trying to find a job for more than 2 years. Her mother was dissatisfied with her own current occupation and only did the work to be able to provide for the family. This participant experienced inner conflict about her career choice as she wanted to have a choice about her own prospective career and she wanted to follow her dreams, unlike her parents’ current situation. Unfortunately, her mother told her that she won’t be able to pursue her dreams as they did not have the financial capacity to support her in achieving her goals. She also told her child that one could not necessarily follow one’s dreams, but should rather settle for anything that provided an income. Initially this participant felt that she would never be able to reach her career goals due to socio-economic barriers, but this participants’ self-construction and academic self-construction was also positively influenced, regardless.

The only other noticeable difference which was discovered during the pre-intervention interview between the different genders were that all the male participants had somewhat of an idea about a future career choice, whereas two female participants mentioned that they were unsure and had not thought about the matter much.

## Discussion

This research represents an attempt to answer calls by experts in the field of career counselling for more research on the topic. We argue that learners need to be supported during early childhood as they explore careers, become curious about the world around them, and develop their thinking and adaptability (Hartung et al., 2005; Watson & McMahon, 2005). The purpose of the study was to explore and assess the feasibility of life-design-based counselling and the influence thereof on Grade 7 learners’ academic self-construction. The primary research questions were:

- What is the influence of group life-design-based counselling on grade 7 learners’ academic self-construction?
- How did Grade 7 learners experience the group life-design-based counselling intervention executed in the current study?

These two questions are discussed in the following sections.

## What is the Influence of Group Life-Design-Based Counselling on Grade 7 Learners’ Academic Self-Construction?

Overall, it is clear from the findings that the life-design-based counselling activities contributed to enhanced academic self-construction where the participants’ perceptions regarding schooling, self-regulation, attitudes, motivation, and self-efficacious beliefs were influenced positively by means of the intervention. Short statements/utterances such as *“I now know that I am good in (it) and I will be able do it”* (James), *“This can be true”* (Peter), and *“I know I will achieve my dreams”* (Sarah), revealed how the participants’ perspectives were positively shaped/changed, which contributed to their enhanced self-efficacy. This finding supports the finding of Maree (2018a:428), who found that *“people’s sense of self strongly influences (and is influenced by) their idiosyncratic life stories and promotes the formation, sustainability, and continuance of their life scripts.”* The afore-mentioned observations also support the findings of Gottfredson (2002), who states that children are assisted in their career development when they gain broad career-related experiences, which in turn can uncover their unique career interests. As learners participate in various experiences, key early career development facets are addressed, too (Collin & Guichard, 2011; Guichard, 2005, 2009). Based on the participant responses from the current study (e.g. *“I decided that I definitely want to become a CA. I want to do even better this term and have set my goals”* (F;10;2;51–53)), the findings support Turner and Lapan’s (2012) and Watson and McMahon’s (2007) assertion that they need to be dedicated to their learning as their current efforts are the stepping-stones in actualising their future career goals and aspirations. According to Yang, Yaung, Noh, Jang and Lee (2017), individuals who have high career aspirations are more likely to actively pursue their career goals. Career education activities also facilitate the necessary career interests and information which further highlights the relationship between school activities and future work, goals and aspirations (Gelažauskienė, Augienė & Lamanauskas, 2018). Since school environments comprise excellent starting points for career guidance (Liu, McMahon & Watson, 2015), learners should benefit from connecting their learning and school activities to potential careers (Gillies, McMahon & Carroll, 1998). In fact, the important impact of learners’ current learning on their future aspirations cannot be overemphasised. The findings further suggest that significant others such as parents, peers and role models have a major influence on the career development of young people.

The participants identified more clearly the impact of their current learning on their future lives

(e.g. *“For the first time I actually believe in myself and I also came to believe that I really can, and will be able, to do this”* (F;6;1;9–10)). They gained insight into their own behaviours regarding academic actions and perceptions, which was the highlighted objective of this intervention. Their thinking and perceptions were adjusted, and an improved sense of responsibility was brought about. Ultimately, the participants gained much, as they were supported and empowered to connect their academic “selves” with their future aspirations and life goals. This concurs with Savickas (2018) where he refers to “crystallisation” as a cognitive process during which individuals articulate possible selves with regard to careers, which are consistent with their unique interests, skills and values, realising the fit between the self and the occupation. As they were able to make sense of the aforementioned, the participants were able to successfully plan the steps required to shape their future career trajectories, which refers to “actualisation” (Savickas, 2018) – by actualising a career choice, individuals turn their articulated occupational choices into active behaviours to realise their goals.

Participants participated in activities during which they could reflect on their strengths, weaknesses, role models, daily experiences, career choices, values, self-efficacious beliefs and their subjective identities. All of these factors contributed to their early career development (e.g. (B2;2): *“There are a lot of things I am good at.” “I am very talented and I should appreciate that.” “Although I am not perfect, I don’t have to be, I can learn”*); (taken from the reflection activities). By means of a reciprocal relationship, their reflections also enhanced their academic self-construction (e.g. *“I realised I will have to work very hard in my languages as I will need these to be efficient in language for communication, advertisement and other retail issues”* (Sammy)). This group intervention (or programme) provided valuable insights where the participants came to recognise the connection between current lived experiences and future career goals. This agrees with Auger, Blackhurst and Wahl (2005) and Flouri and Panourgia (2012), who found that as learners were exposed to the world of work (by participating in career development interventions), they were equipped to overcome potential career barriers. This can enable them to pursue their career goals with a renewed sense of hope for the future.

The participants realised that the (school) context in which they found themselves impacted on their perceptions and shaped their identities (e.g. *“I am a social extrovert and I love communicating with people. I am intelligent, calm and I am always respectful towards others”* (B4;1)). This may also have a long-term effect on how they approach and

pursue future prospects. The findings corresponded with those of Guichard and Pouyaud (2019) as the processes of the construction of the self, which influenced the participants in this study’s academic self-construction, could be observed in the remarks made by the participants. As the learners endeavoured to explore their future aspirations, crystallisation, specification, and actualisation – as discussed by Savickas (2018) and Savickas et al. (2009) – were identifiable in the learners’ respective responses and expressions.

#### How did Grade 7 Learners Experience the Group Life-Design-Based Counselling Intervention Executed in the Current Study?

The group life-design-based intervention utilised in this study was tailored to support the participants as they identified and made sense of their life themes, to enhance their sense of selves, and to contribute to their early career development. This resonates with Savickas (2016) who refers to how reconstructing an identity narrative with life themes supports clients as they discover the self and envision a future life. Reference was made to the effectiveness of life-design-based activities during which participants expressed their excitement about and sincere appreciation for newly established career goals and aspirations. They came to realise that their life events were likely to contribute to and influence their career trajectories. The intervention widened their career horizons and enabled them to envision a subjective future career that resonated with their true selves.

The various life-design activities facilitated discourse that proved to be of high value, as the participants could actively participate therein, and co-construct and evaluate their thoughts and perceptions. The various aspects of the intervention, pulled together in a unified whole, provided the participants with an opportunity to make sense of the life themes that were guiding their lives (e.g. *“I am a person who works extremely hard and I will never give up on any challenge. I am very passionate about animals; I care for and love them so much, therefore the confusion about my career choice. I wanted to become a veterinarian, but it will be too difficult to assist an animal who got hurt as I would be too sensitive”*). The afore-mentioned agrees with Hartung and Vess (2016) who found that during narrations clients are assisted as they enact and co-construct the self within a life-career.

Opportunities were provided where the participants could explore their inner selves, which are important in making important life decisions (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). The findings on self-exploration (e.g.: *“I am really a lot more talented than I thought. I realised that I am actually good in things and that I too have talents and things I can pursue such as my writing”* (B1;7) and *“I think I*

*am going to need some time to think about this. It is really difficult*) (G;3;3;92–93), concur with the findings and views of Flum and Blustein (2000), Schultheiss, Palma and Manzi (2005) as well as Super (1957), namely that the identity exploration process can be regarded as one of the key elements in children's career development processes. The process holds numerous benefits for young learners who are afforded the opportunity to get to know themselves and relate their enhanced self-knowledge to career development.

As the Grade 7s explored different career options, gained broad career-related experiences, which in turn identified unique career interests, as well as knowledge of the self, ultimately contributed to their career adaptability and development. Ten participants gave evidence of having been empowered to construct (tentatively) a subjective career. Some examples of references made:

*I decided that I definitely want to become a CA. I want to do even better this term and have set my goals* (F;10;2;51–53).

*For the first time I actually believe in myself and I also came to believe that I really can, and will be able, to do this* (F;6;1;9–10).

*I am still a bit unsure* (F;9;1;54).

Recent studies confirm that childhood indeed marks the dawn of career development when young individuals make career decisions, explore the self and different vocational options, and acquire the rudiments of career adaptability (Briddick, Sensoy-Briddick & Savickas, 2018; Hartung, Porfeli & Vondracek, 2008).

An increase in career resilience confidence could be observed, which implies that understanding and addressing perceived barriers (a sub-theme of this study) are likely to help to improve career resilience beliefs and support individuals in reaching their career goals. (See e.g. *“For the first time I actually believe in myself and I also came to believe that I really can, and will be able, to do this”* (F;6;1;9–10). *“Is it correct to say that I have learned that I am actually now positive about my future?”* (F;6;1;6–7). These comments were made by a learner who, at the start of the intervention, expressed some insecurities regarding his future goals. He emphasised how life-design-related counselling can enhance individuals' awareness of the future and positively influence behaviours that increase career resilience (Hartung & Cadaret, 2017). The participants reflected on their unique skills, abilities, qualities and strengths which influenced their beliefs about their capacity to achieve goals and fulfil aspirations. As they integrated the information as set out in the respective life-design-based activities, an increase in their self-efficacious beliefs could be facilitated and observed. The participants reflected on their strengths, successes and personal experiences, and subsequently exhibited an enhanced sense of self-

efficacy, which corresponds with the findings of Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim and Zumbrunn (2013) who found that when learners evaluated and monitored the degree of their successes, it could have a positive effect on their self-efficacy.

The participants mentioned that they felt reassured that they would eventually be able to attain their career goals and dreams. The participants stated that they felt that the life-design-based activities and interpersonal processes in which they participated had promoted their ability to pursue (and reach) unique life goals. This finding resonates with Savickas (2012:15) who states that “individuals must construct a subjective career with which to impose meaning and direction on their vocational behaviour.” The findings also concur with the findings of Athanasou and Perera (2019) and Setlhare-Meltor and Wood (2016) who state that life-design counselling empowers people to actively participate in their own career development.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the afore-mentioned, it would be greatly beneficial to introduce life-design counselling during formative years. The findings of this research call for policy makers to consider implementing life-design-based counselling interventions within schools as they hold major benefits for individuals' lives. Policy makers could also re-consider current curricular content and activities that address career-related themes during early childhood to support learners, as they endeavour to enhance learners' academic self-construction as an integral facet of their self- and career-construction efforts. There are numerous opportunities for career development within schools and these should be utilised and enhanced. Transinstitutional, transnational, national, international, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research should be conducted on the topic.

#### Limitations

As the study was an in-depth investigation of a specific career counselling intervention, the sample was small (12 participants), therefore, the research has extremely limited inferential potential. Further research studies are needed to substantiate the stability of these findings and to elaborate on the value of group life-design-based counselling interventions. A longitudinal study to track the participants' progress in the attainment of their career goals would substantiate the findings. The participants were selected as a purposive (non-random) sample and the participants consisted of individuals from a specific socioeconomic and cultural context. One then wonders what the results would have been if this study had been undertaken in a different environment.

## Conclusion

The value of life-design-based counselling initiatives in the lives of children is substantial. In this study we reported on the influence of self- and career construction (life-design counselling) and how we can support individuals in their current and future contexts. The various aspects of the intervention, brought together in a unified whole, provided the participants with an opportunity to make sense of the life themes that were guiding their lives. Participants' responses (by means of discussions and reflections) to the intervention indicated an overall favourable experience. This life-design-based intervention brought about a positive change in the participants' attitudes and learning behaviour, which may spill over into their future prospects.

## Authors' Contributions

The authors co-wrote the article (N Maree being the lead author and researcher and J G Maree being the study supervisor and second author). Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

## Notes

- i. Activities included, the completion of the CIP (Maree, 2017), lifelines, collages, journal entries, reflections, and discussions.
- ii. There was an exception during step 2 when two sessions were devoted to completing the CIP.
- iii. During the follow-up participants were also given the opportunity to verify and comment on the interpretation of the information.
- iv. A four-digit coding system was applied where the first number referred to the life-design-based counselling intervention, the second number referred to the participant, the third number referred to the page number, and the fourth number referred to the line(s) where the responses could be found. Where the last two numbers are absent, a referral is made to a section within the CIP which could not be numbered.
- v. The information described in the pre-intervention status was obtained by the primary researcher (a teacher who knows these learners). Moreover, data as a baseline was collected through the pre-intervention interview, the learners' first entries in their journals, as well as the initial section (step 1) of the CIP. Descriptions that were relevant to most participants were captured and summarised.
- vi. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- vii. DATES: Received: 16 June 2020; Revised: 19 November 2020; Accepted: 15 February 2021; Published: 31 August 2021.

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