

Career Guidance and Post-secondary Transition: A Case Study at Two Schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

Tiba Mtiya ¹ 

¹ Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.



ABSTRACT

Transitioning from high school to post-secondary education is a critical period that significantly influences learners' educational and career paths. However, numerous learners, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, encounter major obstacles during this transition because they have limited access to career guidance (CG) services. This study examined the role of career guidance (CG) in facilitating post-secondary transition, focusing on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. An interpretivist qualitative approach was adopted, and data were collected from focus group interviews (postsecondary learners) and existing scholarships. The thematic analytical principle was applied to identify the findings of the study, which include challenges of accessing CG services and the effectiveness thereof. Additionally, the findings expose the lack of personalised and responsive career guidance approaches and the absence of technology integration to enhance accessibility and effectiveness. The research raised concerns about the inefficiency of CG practices to address challenges of post-secondary learners and advocates for policy review that promotes equity of career guidance at schools. Furthermore, the study recommends that schools (especially underprivileged) must be provided with funds, resources and infrastructure to provide tailor-made career guidance initiatives and services. Moreover, technology integration into CG practices, provision of professionally qualified counsellors to schools and effective monitoring mechanisms are essential for success. Responding to these recommendations will support post-secondary learners to explore opportunities and thus, make informed decisions about their future. This research contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity, highlighting the transformative potential of practical career guidance for inclusivity and an opportunity-rich learning environment.

Correspondence

Tiba Mtiya

Email:

tymtiya@wsu.ac.za

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INTRODUCTION

Transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education is a critical life-changing phase for learners in determining their future, either to continue with education or pursue a career path.¹ Career guidance (CG) facilitates this transition by helping students make informed decisions about their future pathways.² However, disparities in access to CG services persist, particularly for students from disadvantaged

¹ Andreas Schleicher, "Don't Look up: What Skills for Ecological Transformation?," *Field Actions Science Reports. The Journal of Field Actions*, no. Special Issue 25 (2023): 78–81.

² Tony Watts, *Career Development Policy & Practice: The Tony Watts Reader* (Lulu. com, 2016).

backgrounds.³ Studies show that good career guidance (CG) is crucial during this transition. CG includes different methods and resources that help people make wise choices about their education and careers.⁴ This often involves looking at interests and skills, providing information about different career choices, and offering counselling to help with educational planning. Research indicates that learners who use CG services feel more ready for higher education, enroll more often, and stick with their programs longer.⁵ Existing research highlights that CG helps people understand their options and builds their confidence and motivation, essential for overcoming educational obstacles.⁶

Career guidance has evolved significantly in the 21st century, placing increasing emphasis on digital tools and personalised approaches.⁷ Despite these advancements, many learners, particularly those in under-resourced schools, lack adequate support.⁸ The absence of structured career guidance (CG) can lead to mismatched career choices, higher dropout rates, and long-term socioeconomic disadvantages.⁹ Although CG is recognised as essential, it is often poorly implemented and unavailable to everyone, especially disadvantaged groups. Many learners, particularly from low-income families or minority backgrounds, do not have access to quality CG resources and support, raising concerns about fairness in education. Without proper guidance, these learners may struggle to make informed decisions and pursue paths that do not align with their strengths or interests. While numerous CG models exist, few studies have explored their effectiveness in various contexts and among different demographic groups.¹⁰ This research aims to address these gaps by investigating how CG can enhance the transition experiences of learners, particularly focusing on disadvantaged groups who may face additional challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Career guidance (CG) is a crucial framework that helps individuals navigate their professional journeys, especially during significant transitions such as moving from secondary to post-secondary education.¹¹ It involves more than just selecting a career path; it fosters deep self-awareness and understanding of the environment influencing career choices. Theoretical foundations emphasised by Bah highlight the importance of self-awareness, exploration, and informed decision-making.¹² Brown identifies self-awareness as the foundational step, involving an understanding of one's strengths, weaknesses, interests, values, and personality traits,¹³ which Xu stresses as vital for aligning career choices with personal and professional resonance.¹⁴ Following self-awareness, career exploration entails actively seeking information about various careers, industries, and qualifications through research, internships, and networking.¹⁵ This process allows individuals to assess their fit with different paths and make informed decisions, which Martinez regards as the culmination of self-knowledge and external information, especially vital in a dynamic job market.¹⁶ Savickas emphasises that career guidance hinges on personal

³ Emily K Miller et al., "Strengthening Education through Equitable and Inclusive Evidence-Based Teaching Practices: A Scoping Review," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2025): 266.

⁴ Partha Roy, "Career Guidance: A Way of Life," *SSRN Electronic Journal* 19, no. 39 (2020): 22–31, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3640339>.

⁵ Roy, "Career Guidance: A Way of Life."

⁶ Mohsen Rezaiee and Hossein Kareshki, "Empowering Career Pathways: Integrating Self-Regulation Strategies with Career Counseling Practices," *Frontiers in Education* 9 (November 21, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1422692>.

⁷ A. Hirschi, "The Role of Career Adaptability in the Relationship between Personality and the Career Decision-Making Process," *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 80, no. 2 (2012): 115–23.

⁸ Musawenkosi Phumelela Khomo, "Development of a Mobile Digital Library Model for Teaching Support in Selected Under-Resourced Public High Schools in KwaZulu-Natal" (Durban University of Technology, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.51415/10321/5296>.

⁹ Mpho Gift Ntholeng, "ETD: The Effect of Career Guidance in Secondary Schools on Skills Development and Sustained Economic Participation: Meaningful Employment" (University of Cape Town, 2024).

¹⁰ Itamar Gati and Shiri Tal, "Decision-Making Models and Career Guidance," in *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2008), 157–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6230-8_8.

¹¹ Deitria Victoria Smith-Snead, *The Effect of Racial Identity on Self-Concept and Their Motivation for Black High School Students to Pursue Post-Secondary Education in a New Jersey Public Urban School District* (Caldwell University, 2022).

¹² Ndasi Tamon Bah, "A Qualitative Descriptive Study on the Role of Leader Self-Awareness in Employee Job Engagement" (Grand Canyon University, 2025).

¹³ Courtney M. Brown, "A Model of White Identity Development: Journeying to Allyship and Anti-Racism through Empathy, Self-Awareness, and Affirmative Existence" (Regent University, 2020).

¹⁴ Hui Xu, "The Roles of Between- and Within-person Self-knowledge in Career Decision-making," *The Career Development Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (March 18, 2022): 67–78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12282>.

¹⁵ R. Davis and H. Lee, "Exploring Career Options: Methods and Implications," *Journal of Vocational Education* 25, no. 1 (2023): 78–92.

¹⁶ C. Martinez, "Decision-Making in Career Development," *International Journal of Career Management* 31, no. 2 (2019): 123–40.

factors, interests, values, personality, and environmental factors like socio-economic status, educational access, and labour market demands, all influencing career opportunities and choices.¹⁷ Understanding these factors enables individuals to navigate their options more effectively.¹⁸

CG is a multifaceted framework that supports individuals in understanding themselves and managing the complexities of their career landscapes.¹⁹ Its core elements include assessment tools, career information, counselling, and educational planning, which guide individuals through exploration and decision-making processes.²⁰ Effective CG involves structured practices such as initial assessments, exploration of career options, and goal setting, with continuous follow-up to ensure success.²¹ Responsive CG adapts to learners' diverse needs, emphasising flexibility and relevance, particularly for marginalised groups, thereby promoting equity and access to career development opportunities.²² It also advocates culturally responsive practices that support diverse learners, including those with disabilities or from first-generation backgrounds, ensuring equitable pathways.²³ Notably, the emergence and integration of modern technology have transformed CG by providing online assessments, virtual counselling, and labour market analysis tools, thereby improving accessibility and enabling self-directed, personalised career planning.²⁴

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), of Lent et.al., underpinned the study. The proponents of SCCT posit that career development is influenced by the dynamic interaction of personal characteristics, environmental factors, and the learning experiences individuals encounter.²⁵ The theory also highlights that individuals' career choices are not made in isolation; rather, they are shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external influences.²⁶ The main principles embedded in the theory include self-efficacy, outcome expectation and personal goals.

Self-efficacy beliefs: These are the beliefs individuals hold about their capabilities to execute tasks and achieve goals, significantly enhancing both motivation and perseverance.²⁷ Higher self-efficacy built on vicarious experiences, physiological feedback, verbal persuasions and performance outcome tends to promote greater effort and persistence in the face of obstacles.²⁸

Outcome expectations: This principle refers to the anticipated results of specific behaviours. Positive expectations regarding the outcomes of career-related activities encourage individuals to explore various career options and engage more fully in their educational pursuits.²⁹ For instance, if students believe that their efforts in a particular subject will lead to favourable career opportunities, they are more likely to invest time and energy in that area.

¹⁷ M. L. Savickas, "Integrating Personal and Environmental Factors into Career Guidance," *Journal of Counselling Psychology* 80, no. 2 (2021): 154–68.

¹⁸ G. Thompson, "Environmental Influences on Career Choices: What We Know," *Career Development Review* 9, no. 3 (2022): 201–15.

¹⁹ Y. Chang and M. Foster, "A Holistic Approach to Career Guidance," *Journal of Career Assessment* 31, no. 1 (2023): 55–70.

²⁰ Hirschi, "The Role of Career Adaptability in the Relationship between Personality and the Career Decision-Making Process."

²¹ Gati and Tal, "Decision-Making Models and Career Guidance."

²² Stefania Manca and Manuela Delfino, "Adapting Educational Practices in Emergency Remote Education: Continuity and Change from a Student Perspective," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 52, no. 4 (July 9, 2021): 1394–1413, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13098>.

²³ Yvette Hyter and Marlene Salas-Provance, *Culturally Responsive Practices in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences*, 2018.; N. C. Gysbers and P. Henderson, *Career Guidance and Counselling through the Developmental Life Span* (Routledge, 2014).

²⁴ Nooshin Pordelan and Simin Hosseinian, "Design and Development of the Online Career Counselling: A Tool for Better Career Decision-Making," *Behaviour & Information Technology* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 118–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2020.1795262>.

²⁵ Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett, "Toward a Unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 45, no. 1 (August 1994): 79–122, <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>.

²⁶ Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Toward a Unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance."

²⁷ Albert Bandura, "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 191.

²⁸ G. Lopez-Garrido, "Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory Of Motivation In Psychology," *Simply Psychology*, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/self-efficacy.html>; Robert W Lent, Steven D Brown, and Gail Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory," *Career Choice and Development* 4, no. 1 (2002): 255–311.

²⁹ Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory."

Personal goals: Personal goals play a significant role in determining career trajectories by providing direction and motivation. Goals help individuals focus their efforts and measure their progress toward achieving specific outcomes.³⁰

Effective career guidance can strengthen learners' self-efficacy by equipping them with essential information and skills to navigate their educational journeys while also informing them about potential career outcomes.³¹ Counsellors are instrumental in helping students identify their strengths, set achievable goals, and create actionable plans. In doing so, they must acknowledge the impact of personal factors such as interests, personality traits, and socioeconomic conditions.³²

This alignment underscores the necessity for tailored career guidance practices that are responsive and equitable, ultimately empowering all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in their educational and career pursuits. By providing support that recognises individual differences and fostering an inclusive environment, counsellors can help level the playing field in career development.³³

Overall, the principles of SCCT underscore the importance of both personal agency and contextual factors in shaping career outcomes and highlight the critical role of effective guidance in facilitating Learners' paths to success.³⁴

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach rooted in an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm for an in-depth understanding of learners' experiences with career guidance (CG) during their transition from high school to post-secondary education underpins the study. A case study design was the best fit to provide rich, context-specific insights into individual experiences and the nuanced influences of personal motivations, societal expectations, and resource availability on this critical transition.³⁵

Population and Sampling

The research was conducted in two secondary schools within the Amathole East District of the Eastern Cape. The target population comprised high school learners preparing to transition to post-secondary education. An invitation was sent to all fifty-five learners (total from the two schools) to transition to post-school life. However, six learners per school were recruited using purposive sampling, guided by issues of diversity across gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and academic achievement.³⁶ In addition, participants were chosen considering their imminent transition to higher education, CG access and experiences.³⁷

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, offering flexibility for participants to articulate their perspectives and experiences on CG services.³⁸ Additionally, focus group discussions were

³⁰ Katrin Saks, "The Effect of Self-Efficacy and Self-Set Grade Goals on Academic Outcomes," *Frontiers in Psychology* 15 (March 28, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1324007>; Dale Schunk and Maria DiBenedetto, "Self-Efficacy and Human Motivation," in *Advances in Motivation Science*, vol. 8 (Elsevier, 2021), 153–79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2020.10.001>.

³¹ Schunk and DiBenedetto, "Self-Efficacy and Human Motivation."

³² Saks, "The Effect of Self-Efficacy and Self-Set Grade Goals on Academic Outcomes"; Schunk and DiBenedetto, "Self-Efficacy and Human Motivation."

³³ Spencer G. Niles and JoAnn E. Harris-Bowlsbey, *Now with the AI-Powered Study Tool Career Development Interventions, 6th Edition*, Pearson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2017), https://www.pearson.com/en-us/subject-catalog/p/career-development-interventions/P200000001571/9780135842539?srsltid=AfmBOopGhDhf53I2gD1dbNjFHMTGM7e2ziMPbUK9kz01pv_8iP7xDBX0.

³⁴ Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory."

³⁵ C.M. Bryant, "High School Teachers' Perceptions of Career Pathways Model and Student Transition to Post-Secondary: A Qualitative Case Study" (Northcentral University, 2023); V. Warren and R. Bell, *The Role of Context in Qualitative Case Study Research: Understanding Service Innovation* (SAGE Research Methods, 2022); Ntholeng, "ETD: The Effect of Career Guidance in Secondary Schools on Skills Development and Sustained Economic Participation: Meaningful Employment."

³⁶ N.K. Denzin and J. Salvo, *New Directions in Theorising Qualitative Research: Performance as Resistance*, vol. 4 (Myers Education Press, 2020).

³⁷ N. Jain, "Survey versus Interviews: Comparing Data Collection Tools for Exploratory Research," *The Qualitative Report* 26, no. 2 (2021): 541–54; Omolola A Adeoye-Olatunde and Nicole L Olenik, "Research and Scholarly Methods: Semi-structured Interviews," *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy* 4, no. 10 (2021): 1358–67.

³⁸ J. Smith, *Qualitative Research Methods: A Guide for Social Scientists*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2020); P. Johnson and R. Lee, *Interview Techniques in Social Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

employed to facilitate dynamic exchanges among participants, reveal shared experiences and the qualitative themes related to CG practices.³⁹

Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected through interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, member-checked and analysed using thematic analytical principles.⁴⁰ The process involved systematic familiarity with the data, coding, identifying and interpreting patterns and subsequently the themes. These themes were clustered to construct a comprehensive understanding of the influence of CG on learners' transition experiences.⁴¹

Ethical Considerations

Ethics and ethical issues were at the heart of this study. Informed consent was sought from the participants (schools and learners) and assurance of confidentiality regarding non-disclosure of identity and sensitive information to a third party. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study, including the data collection sessions at any point (autonomy). Safe guiding the interest of the participants against any possible harm (direct or indirect) was an absolute priority (non-maleficence), and acknowledging that the study had no benefits for any party.

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

Limited Access to Career Guidance Services

Many participants reported inadequate access to career guidance (CG) services, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some learners noted that their schools lacked structured CG programs, leaving them to rely on informal sources such as family or peers. The participants stated:

"Our school doesn't have a career counsellor. We just get a talk once a year, and that's it."
(Participant 3)

"I had to ask my uncle about careers because no one at school explained anything properly."
(Participant 5)

"If you don't have money for extra tutoring or career workshops, you're left behind." (Participant 2)

Research by Miller et al. (2025) confirms that learners from under-resourced schools often face systemic barriers in accessing CG, exacerbating educational inequalities. Similarly, Khomo found that disadvantaged students frequently rely on informal networks due to insufficient institutional support.⁴²

This finding aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which highlights the role of environmental factors in career development. Limited access to CG restricts learners' self-efficacy and outcome expectations, as they lack the necessary resources to explore career options effectively.⁴³

The Role of Self-Awareness in Career Decision-Making

The career selection process is complex and involves a wide range of steps, including self-concept, reflection and introspection of one's potential and capabilities (self-awareness). Self-concept is a personal factor that influences the career decision-making process of the individual, with the first step being self-analysis. Riba and Goswami conceptualise self-awareness as a process when an individual realises an in-

³⁹ A. Brown, T. Green, and L. White, "Enhancing Data Collection through Focus Groups: A Comparative Study," *Journal of Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2 (2021): 45–60; M. Wilson, "Shared Experiences and Collective Narratives in Group Discussions," *Social Science Review* 12, no. 3 (2018): 112–30; S. Taylor and D. Adams, "Mixed-Method Approaches in Contemporary Research," *International Journal of Social Studies* 8, no. 4 (2022): 78–79.

⁴⁰ V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Thematic Analysis," in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), 7187–93.

⁴¹ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁴² Khomo, "Development of a Mobile Digital Library Model for Teaching Support in Selected Under-Resourced Public High Schools in KwaZulu-Natal."

⁴³ Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory."

depth knowledge and understanding of one's attitude, skills, principles, interests and confidence, which are fundamental in the career decision trajectory.⁴⁴

A few of the participants claimed to have engaged in self-reflection and thus reported greater confidence in their career choices. However, many lacked structured opportunities to assess their skills and interests, leading to uncertainty. Aligning with this finding, participants 1, 4 and 6 argue that;

"I didn't know what I was good at until a teacher made me list my strengths." (Participant 1)

"I chose my course because my friends did, but now I'm not sure if it's right for me." (Participant 4)

"Career tests helped me realise I like working with people, so I'm considering teaching." (Participant 6).

The study found a positive correlation between self-awareness and career decisions, as the connectedness of these concepts brings to the fore the individual's understanding, strengths, limitations, interests, values, personal traits and realistic goal setting, all of which are integral components of the SCCT. This finding resonates with Brown's assertion that self-awareness is foundational to career decision-making,⁴⁵ and is similar to Xu's claim that structured self-assessment tools significantly improve career alignment.⁴⁶

The Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Career Aspirations

Economic constraints heavily influenced participants' career choices, with some learners abandoning preferred paths due to financial limitations. The submissions made by the participants are reflected in the findings:

"I wanted to study medicine, but my family can't afford it, so I'll do teaching instead." (Participant 2)

"If you don't have connections, it's hard to get internships or advice." (Participant 5)

"Scholarships are competitive; if you don't get one, your options shrink." (Participant 6)

Ntholeng found that financial barriers lead to career compromises among disadvantaged students.⁴⁷ Similarly, Hirschi highlights how socioeconomic status shapes career opportunities.⁴⁸ SCCT acknowledges environmental barriers as critical in career development. Financial constraints limit outcome expectations, reducing motivation to pursue certain careers.⁴⁹

The Need for Technology-Enhanced Career Guidance

Some participants suggested that digital tools (e.g., online career quizzes, virtual counselling) could improve accessibility, but many lacked exposure to such resources. The participants posited:

"If there were an app for career advice, I'd use it every day." (Participant 1)

"We have computer labs, but no one shows us how to use them for career research." (Participant 3)

⁴⁴ T. Riba and K. Goswami, "Career Decision-Making of Adolescents: Role of Self-Awareness and Career Guidance," *International Journal of Indian Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2024): 2172–79; Mamochana A Ramatea and Fumane P Khanare, "Improving the Well-Being of Learners with Visual Impairments in Rural Lesotho Schools: An Asset-Based Approach," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 16, no. 1 (2021): 1890341.

⁴⁵ Brown, "A Model of White Identity Development: Journeying to Allyship and Anti-Racism through Empathy, Self-Awareness, and Affirmative Existence."

⁴⁶ Xu, "The Roles of Between- and Within-person Self-knowledge in Career Decision-making."

⁴⁷ Ntholeng, "ETD: The Effect of Career Guidance in Secondary Schools on Skills Development and Sustained Economic Participation: Meaningful Employment."

⁴⁸ Hirschi, "The Role of Career Adaptability in the Relationship between Personality and the Career Decision-Making Process."

⁴⁹ Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory."

"Online career tests helped me more than school talks." (Participant 6)

In contemporary society, where there is a lot of emphasis on skills and, more so, scarce skills, CG can provide opportunities for learners to understand this reality and explore job environments and availabilities. Additionally, modern technology advocates emphasise the relevance of CG as a medium of advising learners on technology-oriented programmes to pursue post-secondary.

Pordelan and Hosseinian found that digital CG tools enhance accessibility and self-directed career planning.⁵⁰ Similarly, Gati et al. advocate for technology-integrated CG to bridge gaps in traditional services.⁵¹ The theoretical framework (SCCT), which provides the lens for the study, supports learning experiences as key to career development, strengthening the argument that digital tools facilitate career exploration, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and confidence.⁵²

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance career development pathways in under-resourced schools, it is crucial to implement structured career guidance programs tailored to the diverse needs of learners. These programs could provide essential support in exploring various career options, helping learners from underprivileged backgrounds develop skills and knowledge that align with their interests and contemporary job markets. Additionally, integrating digital career tools could significantly improve accessibility, enabling learners to obtain a wealth of information and resources online. These tools include virtual career fairs, online mentorship programs, and interactive skill assessments, all of which could help learners in making informed decisions about their career paths. Furthermore, offering financial guidance and resource allocation is vital in assisting learners in navigating the economic barriers they may face. This involves providing information on scholarship opportunities, budgeting workshops, and developing strategies to manage infrastructure. Also, targeted professional development programmes should be provided to equip teachers and career counsellors with skills in culturally responsive and inclusive guidance practices. Moreover, stakeholder engagement through industry, community organisations and institutions of higher learning could provide learners with hands-on (practical) insights and experiential opportunities, thus enriching the career decision-making process.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the critical importance of effective career guidance (CG) in supporting learners' successful transition from secondary to post-secondary education. The findings underscore significant disparities in access to CG services, especially among learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research emphasises that personalised, accessible, and technology-supported learning can significantly enhance learners' self-awareness, motivation, and decision-making capabilities. The application of the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) underscores the necessity of strengthening self-efficacy, positive outcome expectations, and supportive environmental factors to empower diverse learners. Addressing systemic barriers and integrating innovative, learner-centred approaches are essential for fostering equitable career development pathways, which ultimately improve retention and success in post-secondary institutions.

Study Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study has certain limitations. Firstly, the research was confined to two secondary schools within the Amathole East District in the Eastern Cape, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts. The qualitative methodology, while providing depth and rich contextual understanding, restricts the scope of broad applicability. Additionally, data collection relied solely on learners' self-reports, which introduces potential biases such as social desirability and recall bias. The perspectives of educators, career counsellors, and policymakers were not included, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of systemic

⁵⁰ Pordelan and Hosseinian, "Design and Development of the Online Career Counselling: A Tool for Better Career Decision-Making."

⁵¹ Itamar Gati, Nimrod Levin, and Shiri Landman-Tal, "Decision-Making Models and Career Guidance," in *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (Springer, 2020), 115–45.

⁵² Lent, Brown, and Hackett, "Social Cognitive Career Theory."

challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, infrastructural disparities, particularly in digital access, may influence the applicability of technology-based solutions discussed in the study.

Future Research

To further advance understanding and practice in this area, future research should consider the following directions:

- Conduct studies across diverse regions and varied school types to enhance the generalizability of findings and identify context-specific challenges and solutions.
- Investigate the long-term impact of tailored, technology-enhanced CG interventions on learners' academic persistence, career satisfaction, and socioeconomic mobility.
- Incorporate the views of educators, career counsellors, parents, and policymakers to develop a holistic understanding of systemic barriers and enablers.
- Assess the effectiveness, scalability, and user engagement of specific digital career guidance platforms across different socio-economic contexts.
- Explore alternative approaches such as peer-led guidance, community-based programmes, and policy frameworks aimed at fostering sustainable, inclusive career guidance systems.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Tiba Mtiya is currently a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. She holds a B.Ed. Honours Degree in Education. Currently, she is finalizing her Master's degree, and she is a novice researcher. Also, Tiba Mtiya has presented papers at national and international conferences. Tiba Mtiya serves as a Deputy Chairperson of the Library Faculty committee and also as a Faculty Board member at the Walter Sisulu University.