

CAREER MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH. A CAREER GUIDANCE AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract

Access to quality guidance services, among other objectives, should enable individuals to acquire the skills to manage their careers and direct their life and career paths. These competencies are necessary to cope with decision-making processes, especially in times of change and transition. By focusing on young people who are vulnerable due to adverse, social, family and economic conditions, the analysis can be approached from the perspective of equity and social justice. Promoting the acquisition and development of these skills by these young people has been one of the main concerns of European governmental authorities and entities, which has led to the implementation of different educational measures. These include access to specific vocational training programs aimed at preventing dropouts and achieving social and professional inclusion. This research is part of a wider project, funded by the “Severo Ochoa” Grant Program for Training in Research and Teaching of the Government of Principado de Asturias (Spain), grant number PA-22-BP21-202, which aims to know what research has been done on career guidance in vocational training programs for at-risk youth. Documentary analysis and literature review were used as a method, analyzing twenty-two scientific documents and guidance actions integrated in thirty-six European vocational training programs. The results of the analysis of the scientific papers, in terms of the process of acquiring career management skills, indicate that these young people perceive themselves as having high levels of socio-professional skills acquisition. However, there are differences in perceptions regarding the acquisition of several soft skills and discrepancies between the perceptions of the young people and those of the educational, social and professional agents who work with them in these programs. As conclusions, we highlight the need to adopt a systemic approach that promotes experiences and opportunities for guidance and learning in real contexts, bringing together views between educational and professional environments in order to foster participation, critical awareness and positive expectations regarding the competences acquired by learners. Furthermore, the documentary analysis carried out recognizes the need to propose lines of research focused on the analysis of guidance and competence development processes from a lifelong learning approach, in order to contribute to dropout prevention.

Keywords: *Career management skills, vocational training, at-risk youth, documentary analysis.*

1. Introduction and objectives

Access to quality guidance services is one of the main challenges to achieve by education systems (Psifidou & Ranieri, 2020), to respond to social demand for people to acquire the necessary skills to manage their careers and steer their life and career paths. These kinds of competences, referred to in the scientific literature as *career management skills*, are necessary to cope with decision-making processes, especially in times of change and transitions (Blokker et al., 2019).

Several studies have analyzed the guidance processes of young people in vulnerable situations for different reasons (social, family and economic issues), bearing in mind that these processes must be approached from a clear perspective of equity and social justice (Villardón-Gallego, 2020; Weber, 2023). In this sense, these concerns for promoting the inclusion of particularly vulnerable groups have led to the implementation of various measures and programs in the field of Vocational Education and Training (VET) aimed at reducing educational dropout rates (Cedefop, 2023). For this reason, it is necessary to deepen our knowledge of what kind of career guidance actions are carried out in these programs, which agents are involved in, and what kind of repercussions they have for the improvement of the processes of acquisition and development of socio-professional competences of these youth.

The research presented here is part of a wider research project, which has as general objective: understand the situation of career guidance in the context of VET programs for young people who are at risk of dropping out of the education system. Specifically, the objectives of the present paper are the following:

1. Identify the career guidance actions implemented in Europe's vocational training programs.
2. To find out which career management skills are developed through such actions in Europe's vocational training programs.
3. To examine the implications of these aspects in relation to the educational, social and vocational inclusion of at-risk youth.

2. Methods

This paper presents the results of the bibliometric analysis carried out in the initial phase of the research. A documentary analysis was carried out, following the qualitative approach of the research methodology (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005), through a review of the scientific literature and the analysis of vocational training programs in Europe.

In total, thirty-six VET programs in the European context were reviewed, using the database developed by Cedefop & ReferNet (2019), *Vocational education and training in Europe*. In addition, 22 scientific papers, included in the two of the most relevant databases in the field of study (*WOS Core Collection* and *Scopus*), were analyzed.

Data analysis followed the methodology set out in the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2022), in three phases: identification, screening and inclusion, according to eligibility criteria. Once the study sample was selected, we proceeded to the narrative and content analysis by defining a system of categories, that included the main characteristics of the programs and the studies. All of this, in line with the objectives established in the research.

3. Results

3.1. The state of career guidance in VET programs for at-risk youth

The analysis of Europe's vocational training programs (Figure 1) has made it possible to establish similarities and differences in terms of: (1) the purpose and profiles targeted; (2) the system of vocational qualifications they accredit; and (3) the guidance actions developed.

Figure 1. Number of vocational training programs analyzed by country.



Note: Countries where only one VET program has been analyzed are shown in colour green, while countries where two VET programs have been analyzed are shown in colour orange.

(1) Regarding the purpose of the most programs (24/36), they are aimed at promoting the educational, social and labor inclusion of different profiles of students: those who are at risk of dropping out of the educational system or who have experienced situations of school failure in previous educational levels (14/24), students with special educational needs or learning difficulties (7/24) and students who are socially and economically disadvantaged (3/24).

Specifically, in Austria, the Pre-VET programs (*Berufsbildende Mittlere Schulen, BMS*) are aimed exclusively at migrant pupils with no knowledge of the target language, while the other programs (11/36) do not set specific access requirements.

(2) To assess the level of qualification, we have used as references, the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011 (UNESCO, 2012) and the European Qualifications Framework (QEF) for lifelong learning (Council Recommendation of 22 May 2017), which means that most of the programs analyzed (35/36) are part of secondary education, linked to ISCED level and EQF 2 and 3. All except in Ireland, where this kind of programs are part of post-secondary education, which can recognize ISCED level 4.

These qualifications are recognized in the labor market as the necessary qualification to perform simple and basic tasks. Moreover, in 20 of the 36 programs, these qualifications allow students to remain in the education system by providing direct access to the next level of the vocational education and training system.

(3) Finally, with regard to the guidance actions developed in these programs, they can be classified into four main types of actions:

- Counselling through centers and services with professional counsellors, who provide information on educational and professional insertion pathways (17/36).
 - Integrated career guidance systems, which should place special emphasis on the emotional support of students attending such programs (8/36).
 - Curriculum-integrated activities and specific vocational guidance subjects taught by specialized teaching staff (5/36).
 - Coordinated actions from employment agencies and services for vocational guidance (4/36).
- Only 3 programs out of the 36 analyzed do not provide information on this topic.

3.2. Career management skills developed in VET programs for at-risk youth

The literature review yielded a total of 22 scientific articles, which explore different features of vocational training programs aimed at young people at risk of dropping out of the education system. As a result of this analysis, this paper highlights those scientific articles that are directly related to the process of acquisition and development of career management skills (4/22, see Table 1), in order to identify the most significant implications for research and application in the educational field.

The studies reviewed are focused on analyzing the processes of acquisition of career management skills by young people who live in and experience situations of vulnerability and who are also enrolled in vocational education and training. These studies analyze the self-perceptions of these young people, as well as the perceptions of other educational, social and occupational actors regarding the degree of acquisition and importance given to different competences (Table 1).

As main results, they all agree that these young people have a high degree of perception of the acquisition of these competences. However, according to Frey et al. (2014), in comparison with the perceptions of other young people who are not at risk, the perceptions are relatively lower, especially in the acquisition of social (cooperation, communication, conflict resolution, leadership and responsibility, among others) and methodological (autonomy, techniques and work habits and setting professional goals). Likewise, in contrast with the perceptions of teachers, counsellors and employers' agents, the studies by García-Ruiz et al. (2013), Olmos (2014) and Olmos-Rueda & Mas-Torelló (2017) indicate a large discrepancy between these agents and between these and the students' perceptions, being the first ones much lower.

Table 1. Scientific studies that address the process of acquiring Career Management Skills (CMS) and that have been included in the review.

Authors (publish year)	Research country	Methodology	CMS analyzed
Frey et al. (2014)	Germany	Quantitative	Social Competence (cooperation, conflicts resolution and communication) Methodological Competence (reflexivity, flexibility and analytical ability) Personal Competence (self-awareness, empathy and curiosity)
García-Ruiz et al. (2013)	Spain	Mixed	Interpersonal competence (sincerity, independence, affectivity, kindness, obedience, honesty, coexistence, collaboration and tolerance) Intrapersonal competence (self-improvement, initiative, emotion, self-esteem, learning, knowledge, thinking, knowing, pleasure, vitality and responsibility) Image and care (elegance, aesthetics, good image, adornment, health and personal cleanliness).
Olmos (2014)	Spain	Mixed	Communicative competence Mathematical competence Digital competence Social, civic and labor competences Autonomy and initiative competences Health competence (emotional, physical, social and psychological) Learning to learn competence Interaction with the environment competence
Olmos-Rueda & Mas-Torelló (2017)	Spain	Qualitative	Basic employability competences (instrumental, social and citizenship, autonomy and personal initiative, learning to learn, emotional health and intrapersonal intelligence and responsibility)

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained allow for a better understanding of the processes of guidance and development of career management skills of students enrolled in initial or basic grade of vocational training programs.

Taking into account the specific objectives set out, firstly, it has become clear that the main guidance actions within this type of programs are related to the direct and indirect counselling provided by various educational, social and professional agents. In this respect, it is essential, in accordance with the research proposed by Romero-Rodríguez et al. (2022), to promote collaborative processes and spaces that allow understanding that career guidance must be a shared task and responsibility and, therefore, to achieve the integration of educational and career guidance in the educational plans that take place in these kind of VET programs.

Secondly, in response to the second of the proposed objectives, the analysis of relevant research in this field has highlighted the importance of transversal competences in promoting greater student involvement in their learning process. In line with Villardón-Gallego et al. (2020), the main competences to be taken into account will be related to self-awareness, the development of self-confidence, teamwork and responsibility, as well as emotional, interpersonal and problem-solving skills. However, it will be necessary to analyze the adjustment of realistic and positive expectations regarding the levels of competences acquired, given the discrepancies between teachers' and student's perceptions.

Finally, the third objective was related to the link between these aspects and the processes of inclusion and re-engagement of students in the education system. In this sense, we can conclude that the development of coordinated career processes, as well as the development of lifelong learning and career management skills are key aspects to prevent the risk of dropping out of the VET system (Boza et al., 2015; Cerda-Navarro et al., 2017).

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