"Work and Surroundings": A Training to Enhance Career Curiosity, Self-Efficacy, and the Perception of Work and Decent Work in Adolescents

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Abstract: The development of professional identity starts with childhood. In adolescence, individuals should have appropriate resources to make choices; high levels of self-efficacy and professional curiosity, as well as better representations of the concept of work and decent work, could support adolescents in their planning of the future. For this reason, we developed a training aimed at providing adolescents with resources of professional curiosity and self-efficacy, which would also increase their representation of the concepts of work and decent work. A longitudinal study compared a control group (n = 80) with an experimental group (n = 80). The second group participated in mainly qualitative career counseling activities and showed an improvement in the levels of professional curiosity and self-efficacy; moreover, after the training, the experimental group showed a better representation of work and decent work. Consequently, the training managed to improve the dimensions set out above. The results show that career counseling activities can help increase adolescent resources and increase their chances of finding a qualitatively good job.

Keywords: career intervention; career curiosity; decent work; self-efficacy; career counseling

1. Introduction

The development of professional identity starts with childhood [1–3]. From early adolescence, professional construction becomes a very important activity [4], and preparation for the future is considered one of the main developmental tasks during this phase [5,6]. When we look at career development as a lifelong process, we have to consider that people start working before they engage in actual work activities [7]. In this time frame, changes in the world of work must be taken into consideration. Indeed, in the new European context of the last ten years, work has profoundly changed. Today, the work is characterized by a marked uncertainty and by the increase of "insecure workers" [8]; employment has become flexible, the transitions more frequent, and careers unpredictable [9].

Given these difficulties and in accordance with the life design approach [10], we are convinced that it is important to improve the resources necessary to face the career transitions from adolescence; the importance of helping adolescents in career construction has been supported by many countries of the European Community [11]. An important construct in adolescent career construction is career adaptability, a construct defined as "... the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by the changes in work and work conditions" [12] (p. 254). The dimensions of career adaptability are: the propensity to worry positively for one's future (Career Concern), curiosity about the professional world (Career Curiosity), the conviction that the future is at least partially controllable (Career Control),

and the belief in the self to achieve one's career goals and solve problems (Career Confidence) [13]. High levels of career adaptability correspond with better skills to cope with vocational transitions in adolescents [14–20]; adolescents with high career adaptability are less afraid of failing in the achievement of their future goals [21]. Moreover, career adaptability is positively related with life satisfaction [22,23].

Another fundamental resource for adolescents is self-efficacy. Bandura [24–26] explained that self-efficacy "refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" [24] (p. 191). Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in career development as it influences successful behaviors and academic and career decisions [27]. In a very recent study, Fu et al. [28] showed that self-efficacy plays a positive role in career planning and mediates the influence of professional values on career planning. Self-efficacy has been demonstrated to be negatively correlated with career indecision [29].

Moreover, individual representations of work play an important role in career choices and in career transitions; the ideas people have about work can greatly influence the way they characterize their careers and lives [30]. In adolescence, the concept of work is often poor, and it is influenced by others' experience and context, such as parents, school, and society [31]. For this reason, in our opinion it is important to broaden the idea that children have of the concept of work.

Talking about representation of work, today it is necessary to include the concept of *decent work*; it represents the opportunity for women and men to obtain productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and respect for human rights [32]. The respect for the principles of decent work, albeit shared at political, economic, social, and scientific levels, seems always far from being applied and in any case within the current labor market.

In accordance with all of this, the purpose of this contribution is to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention that aimed to promote, in a group of adolescents, career curiosity and self-efficacy and to broaden the representations of work and decent work.

2. Career Curiosity

An adolescent's ability to cope with professional tasks depends on professional maturity. Professional maturity is also characterized by professional curiosity [33]. Indeed, even if adolescents do not have to make imminent professional choices, they need to start being curious about work; doing so, they could avoid hasty choices [34].

Professional curiosity pushes the individual to know the professions, explore the environment, and to learn information about himself and find points of correspondence between these aspects in terms of interests [35]. It is an important dimension, therefore, because it allows individuals to enter the world of work after a careful analysis of their attitudes and job offers. The lack of this dimension can contribute to having a narrow vision of self, of jobs, and of the possible working scenarios [36]. In fact, with regard to professional curiosity, some authors [37–39] underline how important it would be for adolescents to stimulate a research attitude aimed at increasing their knowledge of the professional world. The lack of career curiosity can lead the individual to have an image of the world of work that does not correspond to reality [40].

3. Self-Efficacy

Bandura's cognitive social theory [41] is based on the belief that individuals are capable of acting in their living environment rather than adapting to it. The elements of this theory are mutual determinism, human agency, and self-efficacy. The first element is introduced by Bandura [24] to indicate the fact that people, their behavior, and the environment influence each other. The human agency refers to the ability that people have to access things through the ability of symbolization, learning by imitation, anticipation, and self-regulation. Self-efficacy corresponds to the beliefs people have of being able to organize the necessary actions to achieve the set goals [24,42].

In adolescence, self-efficacy is linked to decision-making processes [43] and negatively related to depression and symptoms of anxiety disorders [44,45]. Self-efficacy is a good predictor of motivation [46], school satisfaction [47], and academic success [48–51]. According to Bandura [25], self-efficacy plays an important role in career development and shows a positive correlation with all the dimensions of career-adaptability [52]. Enhancing self-efficacy can help adolescents to develop a good career adaptability [53].

4. Work and Decent Work

Knowing the ideas people have about work is important as they can influence the way their careers and lives are managed [30]. In general, work is an activity carried out to produce goods or services that promotes the development of a professional identity [54]; it contributes to psychological well-being, the development of social connections, and self-determination [55].

The flexibility of the 21th century [56,57] can generate a sense of job insecurity that concerns the existence of work in the future [58]. The prominent characteristic of the current labor market is precarious work, whose dimensions are job insecurity, insufficient wages, worker vulnerability (in terms of hours, intensity, promotion, health, and safety), and poor social protection of workers [59]. An alternative point of view is represented by the promotion of decent work. Anker et al. [32] introduced this concept during an International Labor Conference and described it as the opportunity for women and men to get productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and respect for human rights; the representation of work should be linked to the concept of decent work. The idea of decent work includes freedom from any form of discrimination, an acceptable quality of life for oneself and one's family, equal opportunities in work, reconciliation between working time and life, guarantee against insecurity deriving from the possible job loss, and respect in the workplace.

5. Research Aims

The "work and surroundings" training was carried out with a group of adolescents and is based on the Life Design approach [10]. The Life Design approach was born as a response to the changes and challenges of the 21st century with the aim of rethinking career counseling from a methodological and practices' point of view [60]. The individuals who undergo these transformations are not passive respondents but are actively engaged to face the new context with which they are confronted [61]. In light of these considerations, the career counseling intervention becomes an accompaniment in the co-construction of the user's life path [62]. Specific career education activities can support workers in facing transitions, intervening on important constructs in the field of life design [63].

The training presented is divided into five units aimed at stimulating two important resources in career development: career curiosity (dimension that belongs to career adaptability) and self-efficacy. We have also proposed to improve the perception that adolescents have in terms of work and decent work.

Career development begins in childhood with the growth phase, during which children must answer the question "Who am I?"; the answer to this question must contain their strengths, improvement areas, and interests [64]. This phase precedes the exploration one, which begins at about the age of fourteen and focuses on the adolescent and the emerging adult [65]. This phase involves knowing the opportunities in the world of work and exploring professions through the ability to look around [12]. Career maturity occurs when teenagers become more actively engaged in career exploration and more knowledgeable about professions [64]. Self-efficacy is a resource that can support adolescents in what is one of the most relevant stages for development [66,67]. For this reason, and given the limited time available, we have decided to create a path that can enhance self-efficacy and professional curiosity and also expand the idea of work in adolescents.

Specifically, the participants were stimulated to: (1) reflect on what are the situations that differentiate a decent work from a non-decent work; (2) deepen the main professions in terms of

activities and competences to develop career curiosity, and, finally, (3) recognize positive thoughts to increase their self-efficacy.

Our hypothesis was that, compared to the control group, the experimental group would have shown, after the intervention, higher levels of career curiosity and self-efficacy and a greater awareness of the concepts of work and decent work.

6. Method

6.1. Design, Participants, and Procedure

The research design involved an experimental group (training group) and a control group; the assessment was conducted on both groups in T1 (before the training) and in T2 (after the training). The study was conducted in a junior-high school located in Catania (Italy), and involved a total of four classes. Two classes were randomly assigned to the experimental group and two other classes to the control group, with a total of 80 adolescents involved. The participants in the training group were divided into two groups of 20 adolescents each; the latter participated in five meetings for two hours each. The results were analyzed by comparing the two groups in the ante (T1) and post-training (T2) phases.

The students of the experimental group received an invitation from the school to participate in the course. A letter was sent to the parents informing them about this possibility and asking to sign the consent for participation and data processing. The entire research was conducted by an expert in career counseling, and the activities were carried out in the classroom during school hours, in agreement with the teachers and the school manager. During each classroom meeting, only the career counseling expert was present. Participants and their parents were guaranteed anonymity.

The control group consisted of students of the same age who were invited to participate in a longitudinal survey on self-efficacy, professional curiosity, work, and decent work. Also in this case, the parents were given a letter asking for consent to the processing of data. All parents, both from the control group and from the experimental group, gave their consent to participate.

In detail, the participants were 80 Italian adolescents (35 males and 45 females) with an average age of 12.34 (SD = 0.76). The experimental group consists of 40 participants (16 males and 24 females) with an average age of 12.18 years (SD = 0.81) and the control group by an equal number of adolescents (19 males and 21 females) with an average age of 12.50 years (SD = 0.67).

6.2. Measures

To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, we used the measures described below. The reliability of the instruments was considered acceptable with a minimum Cronbach's alpha value of 0.60, as indicated by the literature [68,69].

- Career Curiosity

Career Adaptability Inventory [18]; it is a scale used to measure the dimensions of career adaptability: control, concern, curiosity, and confidence. We have selected the six items concerning the dimension of curiosity (sample item is "how much do you think you have the following ability . . . be curious about new opportunities"). The items are responded on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = I possess very little this ability to 5 = I possess this ability very much). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 at pre-test and 0.64 at post-test.

- Self-efficacy

General Self-efficacy Scale [70,71] is composed of 10 items that evaluate general self-efficacy (sample item is "indicate how much corresponds to yourself . . . I can solve most problems if I try hard") on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = totally disagree to 5 = totally agree). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.79 at pre-test and 0.76 at post-test.

- Ideas about work and decent work

    Two open questions: what is work? What is decent work?

6.3. Training

The training consisted of five meetings in group setting, of two hours each at once, one per week, for a total of ten hours in five weeks. In the first two meetings, we also worked on the reciprocal knowledge; the focus of the training was professional curiosity, self-efficacy, work, and decent work. The five teaching units were as follows:

First meeting: focus was on the knowledge of oneself, work, and decent work.

The starting point of a career guidance intervention should be self-knowledge [72]; for this reason, during the first meeting, we have used the *work style* activity. The participants were asked to answer some questions related to four areas: the work inside the classroom, the style of work at home, the ability to do teamworking, and the ability to pay attention during lessons. Based on the scores obtained, the teenagers identified their strengths and areas for improvement, reflecting on the strategies to be used to improve their weaknesses in studying. During this meeting, we introduced the concept of work [54] and decent work [32] after asking participants to answer two simple questions: What is work for you? What is decent work? These questions were re-proposed at the end of the training and used for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the training.

Second meeting: focus was on career curiosity, self-efficacy, and interests.

After viewing some motivational videos, the participants worked on the professions presented in the Multilingual Iconographic Inventory of Professional Interests (MIPII, [73], www.mipii.net). The MIPII investigates professional interests in junior high school's students. The MIPII uses pictorial stimulus and invites the respondents to indicate how attracted they feel to each of the 95 professions represented; the answers are indicated on a scale from 1 (little) to 5 (much). Respondents have the opportunity to choose option 0 if they do not know the profession. The 19 professional areas evaluated were: agriculture, hospitality, art, classical, economic, construction, aesthetics, legal, information technology, linguistics, security, music, health, science, social, technology, transport, tourism, and sport. The participants first viewed and commented on the professions, then filled in the protocol identifying the professional areas of greatest interest to them.

Third meeting: focus was on work, decent work, and self-efficacy.

In the third meeting, we gave the participants a story ad hoc constructed. The focus of the stories was the work activity presented from the point of view of the workers. For each story, in small groups, students were required to identify whether or not it was a decent job, listing its characteristics and the motivations of their responses. Another story ad hoc created was used: a teenage girl who achieves her goals with her commitment and thanks to her self-efficacy.

During the fourth meeting, with the aim to stimulate self-efficacy, we used videos and a stimulus story taken from the tool "The right choice? Mine!" [74].

We also asked participants to identify a self-efficacy model and to answer the following questions: Why does he/she have a high self-efficacy? How can I act in the same way as this person? What can I learn from this person? What can I do to seem similar to him/her? To conclude the meeting, we asked the participants to invent professions, placing them in a "dignified" context and working in small groups.

Fifth meeting: focus was on career curiosity and self-efficacy.

Each group presented the professions invented to the other participants, and other videos of reflection on self-efficacy were proposed. The intervention ended with the compilation of a final profile that included the following information: How I am, what I want to do when I grow up and what my commitments are, and who my model of self-efficacy is.

7. Results

7.1. Preliminary Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 25.0 software for quantitative analysis and NVivo 12.0 software for qualitative analysis.

To assess whether there were differences between the control group and the training group in the initial phase of the course, we first compared the two groups with respect to sex, age, self-efficacy, and professional curiosity. No statistically significant differences were found for gender ($X^2_{(1)} = 0.457$, $p = 0.499$) and age, ($t_{(78)} = -1.940$, $p = 0.056$). No differences were found between the training and control group for career curiosity ($t_{(78)} = -1.787$, $p = 0.078$) and self-efficacy ($t_{(78)} = -1.594$, $p = 0.115$).

To analyze the definitions of work and decent work, we carried out the qualitative analysis in the following way: First of all, the answers were coded using the "nodes" tool, referring to the topics that characterized the participants' opinions on the concepts of work and decent work. Subsequently, we were able to create the tables of nodes and references that made it possible to identify any differences between the groups or between pre and post training.

For the concept of work, we identified the following nodes through the bottom-up mode; therefore, starting from the analysis of the text: (1) *economic utility* (all the answers that referred to the economic aspect fall within this node), such as, work is something you need to earn, work is something you need to buy the things we like; (2) *psychological well-being*; this category includes all the answers that were referred to the possibility of realizing one's goals and desires or feeling well through work, such as, work is to fulfill one's dream, work allows you to feel good; (3) *development of social connections*; this node is made up of all those responses that highlight the possibility of developing relationships through work and feeling useful to society, such as, work allows us to be with others, work allows us to help others; (4) *commitment*; the answers that refer to the commitment to carry out the work fall into this category, such as, work is commitment, work puts you to the test. We also decided to code the non-answers in a fifth node that we called (5) *no response* as it seemed interesting to investigate whether the number of non-answers could change between the beginning and the end of the intervention.

With regard to the differences between the groups, Table 1 shows the nodes and the respective references identified for each node, both in the control group and in the experimental group in the pre-training.

Table 1. Nodes and references between training group and control group in T1.

Concept	Nodes	References	
		Training group	Control group
	Economic utility	26	24
	Psychological well-being	8	11
Work	Development of social connections	4	5
	Commitment	5	8
	No response	3	1

Comparing the nodes and references found in the control group and in the training group, there are no marked differences in the description of the concept of work in the pre-stage phase. Both groups, in fact, describe work as something that is primarily used to earn money. Fewer references refer to the other identified nodes: psychological well-being, development of social connections, and commitment.

Regarding the concept of decent work, we followed the definition of Anker et al. [32] and we identified the following nodes through the top mode: (1) *respect for rights*; this node is made up of all those answers that have to do with respect in the workplace, such as, a job in which employees have rights, a job that falls within the law and is not illegal; (2) *equity*; the answers that fall under this node refer to equal treatment and opportunities in the world of work, such as, a job that must be equal for

everyone, a job in which everyone is treated equally; (3) *safety*; this node refers to the protection and guarantee of work against uncertainty, such as, safe work, work done in the right hygienic conditions and that respects workers; (4) *freedom*; this node refers to freedom of choice and discrimination, such as, a job in which everyone can say what they think, a job in which they can freely express themselves with colleagues and their boss; (5) *other*; all other responses that do not identify the concepts related to decent work, such as, not too heavy work, work that must not be bad, fall within this node. Moreover, in this case we counted the non-responses that returned to the node called (6) *no response*. Table 2 shows the nodes and the respective references identified for each node, both in the control group and in the experimental group in the pre-training.

Table 2. Nodes and references between training group and control group in Pre-training (T1).

Concept	Nodes	References	
		Training group	Control group
	Respect for rights	12	15
	Equity	3	4
Decent Work	Security	1	1
	Freedom	0	0
	Other	15	17
	No response	10	12

Similarly to the previous analysis, it seems there are no significant differences in the description of decent work between the two groups. Some students identified dignified work as respect for rights; few of them identified the characteristics of equity and security. A large part of the sample did not respond or tried to give a definition that was inconsistent with the models given.

7.2. Effectiveness of the Training

Statistically significant differences for paired-samples t test are summarized in Table 3. The table shows that, during the beginning of the training (T1), there are no differences between the training group and the control group; significant differences were shown at the end of the training (T2). In fact, the experimental group shows a more professional curiosity and a higher self-efficacy than the control group.

Table 3. Differences between training group and control group in T1 and T2.

Dimension	Group	Pre-Training (T1)		Post-Training (T2)	
		M	**DS**	**M**	**DS**
Career curiosity	Training	21.60	3.49	*25.20 **	3.17
	Control	23.18	4.33	*23.03 **	4.08
Self-efficacy	Training	34.55	6.42	*39.00 ***	5.90
	Control	36.60	4.99	*36.10 ***	4.96

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the training, the differences in T1 and T2 were calculated, both in the control group and in the experimental group. These differences are highlighted in Table 4 and in the Figure 1.

Regarding the definition of work and decent work, we analyzed and compared the definitions of the two concepts in pre-training (T1) and post-training (T2). Table 5 shows that, following the process, the training group seems to have a broader and more complex definition than the control group. For example "work is an activity where you can earn money" (T1) after training has become "work is something that makes us feel good, makes us feel useful to society, and allows us to support

the family" (T2); or "a decent job is an activity in which you earn a lot" (T1) after training becomes "working with dignity means having rights and being equal and safe" (T2).

Table 4. Differences between T1 and T2 in the training group and control group.

Dimension	Group	Pre-Training (T1)		Post-Training (T2)	
		M	**DS**	**M**	**DS**
Career curiosity	Training	*21.60 **	3.49	*25.20 **	3.17
	Control	23.18	4.33	23.03	4.08
Self-efficacy	Training	*34.55 **	6.42	*39.00 **	5.90
	Control	36.60	4.99	36.10	4.96

* p < 0.001.

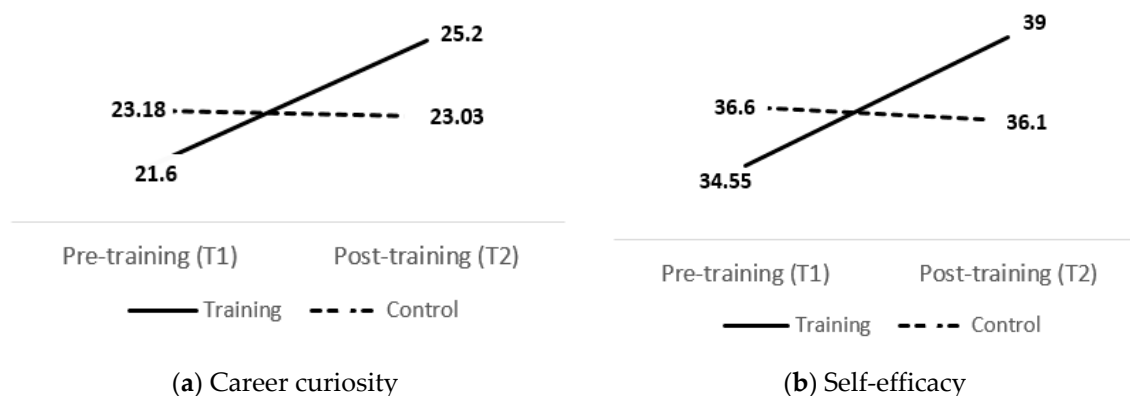(**a**) Career curiosity　　　　　　　　　　　(**b**) Self-efficacy

Figure 1. Differences between training group and control group in T1 and T2.

Table 5. Nodes and references between training group and control group in T1 and T2.

Concept	Nodes	References			
		Pre-Training (T1)		Post-Training (T2)	
		Training group	Control group	Training group	Control group
Work	Economic utility	26	24	24	26
	Psychological well-being	8	11	19	12
	Development of social connections	4	5	17	5
	Commitment	5	8	4	6
	No response	3	1	1	1
Decent Work	Respect for rights	12	15	20	14
	Equity	3	4	7	2
	Security	1	1	12	0
	Freedom	0	0	6	0
	Other	15	17	5	15
	No response	10	12	3	11

8. Discussion

The aim of the study was to create a training that would empower two important resources in adolescence, career curiosity and self-efficacy, responding to the emerging needs in career and vocational guidance of creating interventions on career adaptability resources [10,75].

We also decided to include the concept of work and decent work, as we considered it important for teenagers who will deal with career transition. In fact, thinking about the meaning of these two terms and their characteristics, rearranging stereotypic convictions, is particularly significant in the Italian context, where models of undignified work are common.

The data collected show that our training had good results; in fact, the levels of professional curiosity and self-efficacy have increased in the training group and had no changes in the control group, and the definitions of the concepts of work and decent work were broader in the training group following the training compared to the control group.

The teenagers were involved in activities in which they analyzed professions or thought about the professions of the future; moreover, they reflected on their self-efficacy models and compared them. This probably contributed to increasing the levels of professional curiosity and self-efficacy of the training group compared to the control group.

These results show the possibility of enhancing important resources to help adolescents face the difficult times they will go through in the future [76].

The career guidance training was actively participated by the students involved. In our opinion, the participation was favored by the choice to use mainly qualitative techniques; these techniques allow us to assign participants an active role during the career counseling phases and to study the individual globally [77]. In this way, it was possible to enhance some of the dimensions on which we have chosen to work.

Implications for Theory and Practice

From a theoretical point of view, our training was inspired by the Life Design model [10] and contributed to improving some of the dimensions that are considered crucial within that. We must not forget that there are some experiences that work on the dimensions of Life Design, starting from primary school. Ginevra and Nota [34], for example, have developed a ten-unit path to stimulate some career adaptability resources such as optimism, hope for the future, curiosity, career exploration, and professional knowledge in children of primary school age. Koen, Klehe, and Van Vianen [78], on the other hand, have developed training to enhance career adaptability in a group of 32 university students, providing a path of four sessions preceded by a presentation meeting and followed by a concluding one. In fact, some research has shown that there are several factors that favor or inhibit well-being [79], and performance can depends on both intellective and non-intellective factors; the latter are more modifiable [80]. In any case, we believe that such work is possible from an early age, showing that childhood is the starting point for the development of professional identity [1–3,6,81] and adolescence is a crucial moment for professional planning [4,82,83].

From a practical point of view, our training shows that career guidance training structured according to the above criteria has positive effects on professional curiosity and self-efficacy and contributes to broadening the ideas that teenagers have of work and decent work. Within the various stages of the process, mainly qualitative procedures were used. The qualitative tools allow a holistic study of the individual through his/her active involvement [10,77,84] and have therefore been useful in various experiences with various types of targets [85–87].

In future career guidance practices, there may be some elements to be taken into consideration: For example, teachers could be involved and trained in career and vocational guidance issues. In fact, they could represent a valid resource within such a project. After all, some experiences have shown that the involvement of teachers can also be a valid support in the conduct of classroom activities [86,88]. An involvement of parental figures within a career and vocational guidance training would also be useful. Much research [89–91], in fact, has shown the influence of parent in the construction of the school and professional projects of their children through a series of factors such as concern and support [92–95], expectations [96,97], interests and aspirations [98,99], and positive reinforcement [100–102]. For these reasons, they should be involved through parent-training actions that aim to guide them in the co-construction of their children's future [103].

It would be possible to broaden the path by providing for further meetings so as to also include within it new constructs relating to risk in society [104].

Finally, the importance of career and vocational guidance action during the entire school cycle in support of skill development within the 21st century working context, should be noted.

9. Conclusions

In summary, one of the scopes of the study presented is to focus on the need to improve, in the school context, the skills that allow a reading of the reality consistent with the limits and advantages of the 21st century. Steinberg [105] pointed out that adolescents' brains are physically characterized by plasticity, that is, by the possibility of being shaped through experience. In his book "Adolescent. The age of opportunity", he proposes a reversal of the traditional perspective that sees adolescence as the age of risk, suggesting a vision of this phase of life as a period of opportunity that, however, needs to be recognized and stimulated in order for adolescents to be able to express themselves better. This reflection, in our opinion, highlights the need to focus on the resources of individuals to improve those aspects that have been discussed previously. The experience described above, on the other hand, shows how such an empowerment work is possible, and helps to better understand the importance of career and vocational guidance activities and the role of the career counsellor within the school.

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