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Career guidance actions from students' perspective. An analysis of the degree of perceived usefulness

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Abstract

Context: Career guidance has focused on promoting career readiness of young people, which has become a key factor in the guidance process of students. It requires schools to guide their practices towards the development of these aspects and to invest in career guidance. In this sense, the transference between science and practice is essential.
Approach: The present study aims to analyse the secondary students' perceptions of the degree of usefulness of career guidance actions. Following a quantitative research methodology, an ad hoc questionnaire, linked to the dimensions experiencing, exploring and thinking about the future, was designed. It was applied in a pilot study to a sample of 351 students from five secondary schools in Asturias (Spain).
Findings: The results obtained indicate high degree of perception of the usefulness of activities related to the construct of experiencing the future. This is followed by a high degree of perceived usefulness of actions liked to exploration. In contrast, guidance actions linked to thinking about the future have lower scores. Analyses by gender show that there are no significant differences in perceptions. However, in the analysis by grade, it is observed that in the exploration variable, there are significant differences of these activities, second-grade students obtain lower perceptions of the usefulness of these activities.
Conclusions: In conclusion, the practical implications point to proportionate actions at three levels: guidance practitioners, schools and policymakers. Guidance improves when teachers plan regular guidance actions, when schools establish partnerships and when policymakers ensure accessible labour-market information, in order to provide students with opportunities to participate in professional experiences during secondary education.

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career readiness, career guidance actions, usefulness assessment, secondary education

1 Introduction

In the current working environment, characterised by the volatility and complexity of changes and transformations, career guidance has focused, among other aspects, on the need to promote the career readiness of young people. The aim is to facilitate their access and permanence in the world of work (Echeverría & Martínez-Clares, 2024).

The study of professional expectations and occupational visions is a key factor in student guidance, particularly regarding the acquisition of career management skills. This includes opportunities to explore future employment, to experience workplaces, and to reflect on their future careers. These aspects are directly related to career readiness (Covacevich et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2020).

This situation requires schools to guide their practices towards the development of these aspects and to invest in career guidance (Echeverría & Martínez-Clares, 2024; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2020). In this sense, the transference between science and practice is essential, as it allows to reduce gaps between both spaces and to contribute to collaborative research and action processes in the framework of career guidance. Thus, the study of the actions that schools develop to contribute to the improvement of career management skills and the career readiness of students becomes one of the central elements of their guidance process.

This paper is part of a larger project, which is carrying out in Asturias (Spain), and aims to explore the career guidance needs among young people in secondary and vocational education, integrating the perspectives of different stakeholders (students, teachers, career advisors, mentors at the workplace and student's families). However, the aim of this paper is to analyse students' perceptions of the usefulness of career guidance actions linked to the processes of experimentation, exploration and thinking about their professional future.

2 Theoretical basis

Career guidance as a lifelong learning process implies the acquisition of competences and skills that contribute to the management of life and professional projects (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2025) and, thus, the need to generate opportunities to promote the guidance capacity of individuals as protagonists in the construction of their careers is required. In this sense, following the provisions of Resolution of the Council C319/4, on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies, career guidance should contribute to generate opportunities for the exploration of the alternatives of the educational system; professional experimentation for the knowledge of the possibilities of the working environment, and, finally, the contribution to personal reflection for the discovery of one's own capabilities.

Along these lines, the need arises to promote competences related to self-confidence, adaptability, planning, curiosity or concern for the future (Akkermans et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2024; Savickas, 1997). It is also need to implement guidance actions following an integrative approach between the lines of action in practice and in the scientific field (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network [ELGPN], 2012).

Thus, the term career refers to the set of roles and responsibilities that people acquire throughout their lives, learning and work, and which are performed in social and political contexts characterised by opportunities and constraints (McCash et al., 2021; Thomsen et al., 2022). Career guidance integrated into the education system will enable students to engage in

a process of conscious and informed decision-making (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [Cedefop] et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2022) and, therefore, enhance their preparation for their careers. This process requires schools to design and implement actions that contribute to the improvement of transitions in the pathways, and the construction of life trajectories oriented towards the achievement of their students' life projects (Covacevich et al., 2021).

These actions are linked to career readiness, according to the scientific literature (Covacevich et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2020). They are organised in a dynamic process that integrates three attitudes that students develop in relation to their professional future and that have to do with the exploration of possible future jobs in which to develop their professional activity; with the experimentation of professional tasks and roles in the workplace, and with the reflection on how they imagine their professional future.

Thus, exploration linked to future employment, in which young people can develop their professional activity, involves the development of their capacity to research training and work opportunities, which promotes their planning of their professional future and the adjustment of their aspirations and expectations (Mann et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021).

Experiencing the future career involves the ways in which adolescents can participate in work settings while they are in schools and refers to three specific activities: part-time jobs, work placements in enterprises and volunteering in community and organisations (Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

Finally, thinking about the future is linked to young people's ability to become aware of their future prospects, job expectations and self-efficacy, which impacts on attitudes, values and beliefs that influence their choices and actions (Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

Overall, they constitute the career readiness process which involves, among other aspects, the need to prepare students to face the social and occupational challenges of today's world (Cedefop et al., 2021; ELGPN, 2012; OECD, 2021).

3 Research questions and objectives

In this context, we set out to find out how students perceive the usefulness of guidance actions aimed at exploration, experimentation and thinking about their professional future in relation to academic and professional decision-making. Some questions guiding the research process are: what is the experience that secondary school students have about the possibilities to explore, experiment and reflect on their future in schools? What are the actions that schools carry out to contribute to the career readiness of their students? To what extent are these actions perceived by students as useful to be able to make decisions about their professional future?

The general objective of the current study is to explore how secondary school students experience their career readiness. This objective is specified in three specific objectives:

- Analyse the students' perceived usefulness of interventions aimed at exploring their future in work. For instance, how useful would be for them talking with people about their job or to use curated labour-market information to compare roles, tasks and jobs' profiles.
- Analyse the students' perceived usefulness of activities aimed at experiencing their future in the workplaces, especially visiting a company or shadowing a worker for a day or working on a short project proposed by an external stakeholder in class.
- Analyse the students' perceived usefulness of actions aimed at thinking about their future in work, as writing a short letter to their future self, reflecting on their dreams and future scenarios and setting goals.

4 Method

The study followed a research approach based on quantitative methodology, which involves the collection of information for statistical analysis of the data, following a non-experimental design and based on a survey study (Creswell, 2014). The procedures for the selection of participants, data collection instruments, data analysis and compliance with ethical principles for research based on a good practice in the scientific field are detailed below.

4.1 Participants

A total of 351 students participated in the study, selected using the non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005), which limits results generalizability. As for the main characteristics of the sample, it should be noted that the students were aged between 13 and 17 years old (M = 13.64; SD = *.716*), from five secondary schools located in urban and rural areas in Asturias (Spain).

Of the students, 62.1% were enrolled in the second year of compulsory secondary education and 37.9% in the third year, which according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2012) International Standard Classification of Education corresponds to ISCED 244-341, respectively.

Finally, in terms of gender, 54.4% were female and 43.3% male, taking into account that the remaining percentages correspond to one non-binary person (0.3%) and seven people who preferred not to say their gender (2%). The latter two have not been taken into account in the gender analysis, due to their non-representativeness within the sample participating in the study.

4.2 Instruments for data collection

For the collection of information, the scale on career readiness of the questionnaire on career guidance needs and career management skills was used. This questionnaire was *ad hoc* and validated by expert judgement, obtaining a satisfactory Kendall's W index of .472 (Escobar-Pérez & Cuervo-Martínez, 2008). Specifically, it is a scale containing six Likert-scale items (0=Not at all useful; 4=Fully useful) administrated in paper format and whose formulation was based on a review of the scientific literature (Covacevich et al., 2021; Gysbers, 2013; Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2021). The reliability of the scale was calculated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951), which yielded a score α = .826 and McDonald's omega (McDonald, 1999), with a score ω = .898.

4.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the statistical program Jamovi v.2.3.28 (The Jamovi Project, 2022; R Core Team, 2021). Firstly, we proceeded to the Likert scale scoring and the extraction of descriptive statistics, as well as the Shapiro-Wilk test to assess normality, which determined the use of non-parametric tests (Rochon et al., 2012).

Second, between-group analyses were performed to test for the influence of gender and school grade using the Mann-Whitney U-test. In the interpretation of the results, the confidence level set at 5% was taken as a reference and the effect size estimate was calculated using Rosenthal & Rubin's r (2003), whose interpretation allows the distinction of three levels: small (.10 y <.30), moderate (.30 y <.50) and large (≥.50).

4.4 Research process and ethical implications

The research procedure followed the ethical principles established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024), with regard to respect for privacy and confidentiality, the right to informed consent and participation, and the autonomy of the participants.

In this sense, the project was evaluated by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oviedo, obtaining a favorable report (Code 33_RRI_2023) and the Regional Ministry of Education of the Government of Asturias was informed in order to request authorisation for data collection in schools.

Likewise, in the contact with the participating schools, it was informed that participation was voluntary and both the students and their families were informed and gave their consent to participate in the research.

The information collected was stored in a secure location and the data was only used for the purposes of the research.

The data collection process was carried out between December 2023 and April 2024, and the process of returning the information to the schools took place in June 2024.

5 Results

The results obtained indicate a high degree of perceived usefulness on the part of students with regard to guidance actions for career readiness, whose score has been obtained from weighting of the three constructs that comprise it. Figure 1 shows that 28.20% of students rate activities related to exploration, experimentation and reflection on their professional future very positively. This is followed by 41.30% who have an intermediate assessment of the usefulness of these activities in contributing to decision-making process and the design of their life projects. In contrast, 30.50% of the students who participate in the study found that these types of activities contribute to a lesser extent to their professional development.

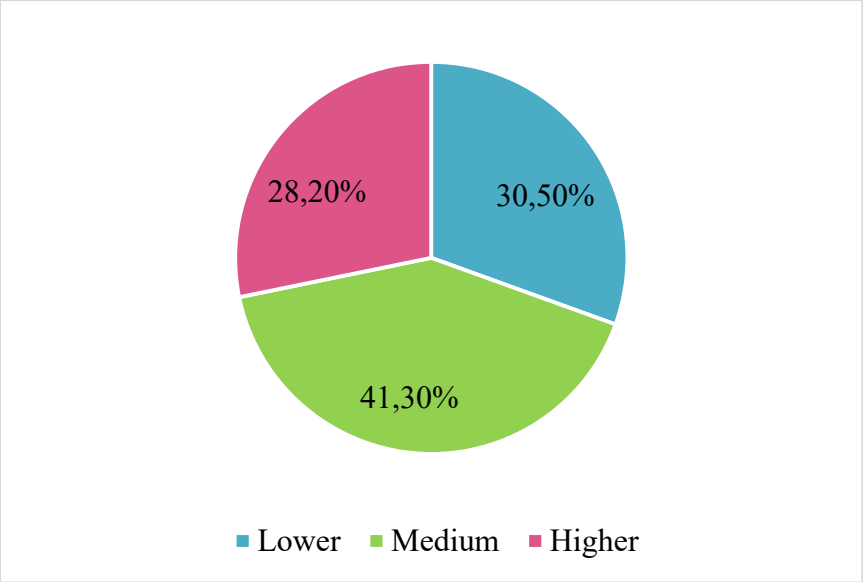

Figure 1 Degree of perceived usefulness in relation to guidance actions for career readiness. (Note: Own elaboration)

Specifically, the highest degree of usefulness is concentrated in activities related to the construct of *experiencing the future* (M = 2.84; SD = .487), which they were asked about referring to visit companies or shadowing a worker for a day and working in school projects

based on external stakeholders' needs following, for example, a service-learning method approach. It was followed by a high degree of perceived usefulness in actions liked to *exploration* (*M* = 1.88; *SD* = .804) such as participate in career conversations with other people, especially, workers about their jobs and participate in research process about educational pathways and labour-market information in order to compare roles, tasks and jobs' profiles. In contrast, guidance actions linked to *thinking about the future* have lower scores (*M* = 1.00; *SD* = .000), they were actions related to self-knowledge process, like write a short letter to their future self, reflect on their dreams and future scenarios and set goals (Table 1).

Table 1:
Descriptive statistics of students' general perception of the usefulness of guidance actions for career readiness

	M	SD
Career readiness	1.98	.767
Explore future employment	1.88	.804
Experience workplaces	2.84	.487
Think about futures	1.00	.000

Note. Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD).

Afterwards, the results were analysed according to gender and school grade, taking into account that, in the *think about futures* variable, the statistics for comparison between groups could not be applied, as it provided constant values.

Thus, taking into consideration the gender variable, it can be established that there are no statistically significant differences in any of the constructs analysed (Table 2). Although women have higher averages in the perception of career readiness actions, especially in the *experience workplaces* variable. This could suggest that girls tend to rate 'experience workplace' activities higher than boys.

Table 2:
Results obtained for the gender analysis

	Female		Male		U Mann-Whitney	*p*	*r*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Career readiness	2.05	.759	1.91	.766	13029	.082	.102
Explore future employment	1.91	.822	1.87	.778	14201	.714	.021
Experience workplaces	2.90	.369	2.78	.586	13750	.118	.005

Note. Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD), p value (p), effect size (r).

Finally in the analysis by grade, it is observed that in the *explore future employment* variable, there are significant differences of these activities, where second-grade students obtain lower perceptions of the usefulness of these activities, indicating a large effect size (*r*= .142; Table 3). This suggests that students at higher grade rate 'exploring future' activities higher than students at lower grades.

Table 3:
Results obtained for the school grade analysis

	2nd grade	3rd grade	*p*	*r*

	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	U Mann-Whitney		
Career readiness	1.92	.773	2.07	.751	12999	.083	.103
Explore future employment	1.80	.787	2.02	.816	12437	**.017***	.142
Experience workplaces	2.83	.511	2.86	.446	14396	.840	.006

Note. Mean (M), Standard deviation (SD), p value (p), effect size (r).

6 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore how secondary school students experience their career readiness processes. Specifically, the aim was to analyse the perceived usefulness, on the part of 2nd and 3rd grade students in Asturias, of actions aimed at promoting exploration, experimentation and reflection on their possible future in the workplace. The analysis also took into account gender and school grade.

Thus, in general terms, the data showed results related to a high perception of perceived usefulness, especially of those actions aimed at contributing to the generation of opportunities for experimentation and exploration of future jobs in real contexts. However, actions linked to thinking about the professional future were perceived as less useful by students. These situations coincide with previous studies which, on the one hand, highlight the importance of developing experiential interventions for the construction of identity and professional self-efficacy (Gati & Levin, 2014; McMahon, 2020; Meijers & Lengelle, 2015). On the other hand, the difficulties implied in involving students in decision-making process and critical reflection processes, which require a high degree of support and accompaniment by career advisors and practitioners (Pizzolato, 2006; Savickas, 2005).

With regard to the analysis by gender, it should be noted that no significant differences were found in the perception of the usefulness of career readiness activities. These results are consistent with previous studies that indicate a tendency for differences in this regard to decrease, despite being a widely studied variable and where the influence of gender on specific aspects of the career guidance process is proven (Kurbanoglu & Arslan, 2015; Punzalan, 2022). Furthermore, authors such as Hancock & Taylor (2019), point to the importance of including a broader gender perspective in career guidance studies. This is a limitation of the study, which calls for the need to broaden the sample to include non-binary students and other gender identities, which would allow for a much more accurate and gender-relevant analysis.

In the analysis by school grade, significant differences were found in the dimension *explore future employment*, where 3rd grade students identified such actions as more useful compared to 2nd grade students. These differences, in line with the scientific literature, can be explained by the development of educational pathways, characterised by specific decision-making moments, where career guidance becomes more important as students' age increases (Martínez-Clares et al., 2014).

As practical recommendations and implications, the results point to proportionate actions at three levels: teachers and guidance practitioners, schools and policymakers and system leaders. For teachers and guidance practitioners, it is essential to start by assessing the specific needs of their students in order to design career guidance plans that enable them to act as career guidance influences for their students. For schools, it will be necessary to start from the needs analysis carried out for the planning meaningful activities for decision-making and the design of life projects by students. In addition, it will be necessary to promote contact with companies

and entities in the school environment for the design of joint plans and projects on career development. Finally, for policymakers and system leaders, ensure access to accurate and up-to-date information on the education system and the labour market by promoting accessible databases on websites such as Euroguidance Spain or TodoFP and increasing research on career guidance at schools. Guidance is supported when schools are enabled to form durable partnerships with employers and community organisations, curate accessible labour-market information, and timetable regular guidance actions rather than isolated events. Through these inputs is likely to enhance students perceived relevant of exploration and futures-orientated tasks.

The main limitations of the study are linked to three aspects: (a) sample size, (b) geographical restriction to Asturias, and (c) self-report bias. The first of these, due to the small sample size, the results cannot be generalised to a wider population, although they provide important insights for career guidance in science and practice. Furthermore, the number of participating students limits the accuracy and stability of comparisons between subgroups, so the results should be interpretated as indicative patterns rather than definitive estimates. The second one refers to the restriction of the study on a specific region of Spain, with its own contextual characteristics, so transferability other contexts (rural/urban environments, schools' systems and labour market structures) should be assessed with caution. The third and the last one, although the data collection instrument showed a high reliability rate, more robust validation methods may be required as the use of self-report surveys may introduce certain biases that influence social desirability on the part of students (Álvarez et al., 2015).

Therefore, for future studies will assess these limitations. In particular, it will be essential increase the number of students participating in the study to obtain robust quantitative results, as well as integrate the perspectives of other guidance stakeholders, especially, teachers and career counsellors and employers or social organisations leaders (a). Likewise, cross-national and cross-regional comparisons could examine how institutional ecosystems and labour-market conditions shape perceived usefulness of career guidance actions, helping to identify context-sensitive yet transferable practices (b). Finally, from the perspective of career guidance research, it will be necessary to promote studies based on a mixed methods approaches allowing for a broader and deeper understanding of the guidance actions that schools carry out from a qualitative and narrative perspective (c).

In spite of these limitations, the study has made significant contributions, highlighting the importance of recognizing the need for students to have opportunities to participate in professional experiences during secondary education, as well as to continue promoting critical thinking and exploration on their professional future.

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