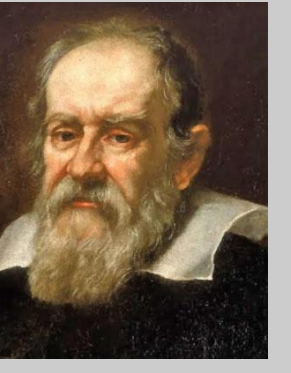




Work Experience Quality and Vocational Development



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The provision of workplace-based experiences (internship/placement) is an important component of the training program of students attending technological and professional courses (VET), in secondary education. Regarding the effect of such experiences in vocational development, research results are not conclusive enough, mostly, if we consider the theoretical expectation that work experiences clearly affects the vocational development of adolescents (e.g., Dawis, 2002, 2005; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994; Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996; Savickas, 2005; Super, 1957; Super, Savickas & Super, 1996; Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986). As a corollary of this observation, the main purpose of this study is to clarify the relationship between work experience quality and students vocational development. Using a longitudinal design (pre and post - internship), we conducted a study (N = 346) that explores the relationship between perceived qualities of the training experience (IQE - autonomy, colleagues feedback, social support, task variety, learning opportunities, instructions clarity, training, supervisor feedback and support) and career exploration (CES – Stumpf et al., 1983; Taveira, 1997), career decision-making (CDS– Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico & Koschier, 1976; Silva, 1997), Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE-SF (Betz, Klein & Taylor, 1996; Silva & Paixão, 2005) and career commitment (CCCS Blustein, Ellis & Devenis, 1987; Silva, 1997). The results suggest that the quality of work experience is relevant for the vocational development of students, mainly, in what concerns the process of career exploration.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure: Participants were 346 high school students attending 12th grade. The administration of the instruments occurred at the beginning (T1) and at the end of their training experience (3 months later). The sample comprised 176 males (50.9%) and 170 females (49.1%), whose mean age was 18.41 years (SD = 1.573; range = 16 - 26).

Instruments – A **Demographic Questionnaire** was used to collect information regarding students' gender, age and socioeconomic level.

Internship Qualities Inventory - The IQE was designed to measure the students perceptions of their practicum training quality, in 9 dimensions: Autonomy (4 items, $\alpha = 0.81$), Peer Feedback (4 items, $\alpha = 0.83$), Social Support (4 items, $\alpha = 0.82$), Task Diversity (4 items, $\alpha = 0.83$), Learning Opportunities (5 items, $\alpha = 0.90$), Supervisor Instructions Clarity (4 items, $\alpha = 0.79$), Supervisor Feedback (4 items, $\alpha = 0.80$), Supervisor Teaching (4 items, $\alpha = 0.84$) and Supervisor Support (7 items, $\alpha = 0.87$). Participants responded to the 40 items of the IQE on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5).

Career Exploration Survey (CES; Stumpf, Colarelli & Hartman, 1983) (Portuguese version, Taveira, 1997). The CES is a multidimensional self-administered scale with 53 items using a *Likert-type* response format, designed to assess five beliefs about exploration (employment outlook, certainty of exploration outcomes, external instrumentality, internal instrumentality and importance of preferred position), four dimensions of the career exploration process (self exploration, environment exploration, intended-systematic exploration and amount of information) and three reactions to vocational exploration (satisfaction with information, exploration stress and decisional stress).

Career Decision Scale (CDS; Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico & Koschier, 1976) (Portuguese version, Silva, 1997). The CDS consists of 18 items scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all like me") to 4 ("Exactly like me"). The first two items assess how decided or certain respondents are regarding their career and major (higher scores indicate **career certainty**). Items 3 to 18, assess antecedents to career indecision (higher scores indicate more **indecision**). A final additional item is an open-ended question permitting the respondent to make individualized statements concerning his/her career indecision and is not scored.

The Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale – Short Form (Betz, Klein & Taylor, 1996) (Portuguese version, Silva & Paixão, 2005). This 25-item scale measures individual's beliefs that they can successfully complete tasks necessary to make career decisions (e.g., accurate self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, making plans for the future). Items are rated on a five-level confidence continuum, ranging from 1 (no confidence at all) to 5 (complete confidence). Higher scores on items indicate higher levels of self-efficacy for career decision making.

Commitment to Career Choices Scale (Blustein, Ellis & Devenis, 1989) (Portuguese version, Silva, 1997). The CCCS is a 28-item instrument, with two subscales: the **Vocational Exploration and Commitment** subscale (VECS: 19 items) and the **Tendency to Foreclose** (TTFS: 9 items). The VECS assesses responses to statements about self-knowledge, knowledge about and commitment to career, exploration of options, and overcoming obstacles. Low scores on the VECS indicate more commitment to career choice. The TTFS assesses willingness to explore career options and beliefs about available career options. High scores on the TTFS indicate being more foreclosed in commitment to a career choice. Low scores on each subscale are optimal, indicating high exploration followed by commitment to a career choice. Respondents indicate their agreement with the statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1=never true about me, 7= always true about me).

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RESULTS

Table 1

Summary data for hierarchical regression analysis predicting changes in Vocational Variables (CES; CDS; CDMSE and CCCS) from T1-T2, using internship quality as predictor (N=346)

	Block I – Vocational Variables at T1	Block II – Block I + Demographic Variables (Control block)	Block III – Block I + Block II + Internship Quality	
	R2	R2	R2	Δ R2 (Block II – Block III)
Employment outlook (EO)	13.8	17.3	22.7	5.4**
Certainty of exploration outcomes (CR)	11.2	13.5	16.4	3.0
External instrumentality (EI)	21.8	24.4	32.8	8.3***
Internal instrumentality (II)	17.8	21.7	26.4	4.7*
Importance of preferred position (IPP)	15.4	17.3	21.5	4.3*
Environment exploration (EE)	19.2	23.1	32.2	9.1***
Self exploration (SE)	19	21.9	25.9	4.0*
Intended-systematic exploration (ISE)	11.9	16.5	29.6	13.1***
Amount of information (AI)	24	27.4	30.7	3.4
Satisfaction of information (SI)	14.4	16.1	20.3	4.3*
Exploration stress (ES)	8.4	9.4	13.8	4.5*
Decisional stress (DS)	13.9	15.0	20.4	5.4**
CDS - Certainty	11.4	12.1	14.6	2.5
CDS - Indecision	24	24.9	29.7	4.8**
CCCS - TTFS	12.3	13.6	18.2	4.6*
CCCS - VECS	20.1	21.6	27	5.4*
CDMSES – self-appraisal	12	14.7	25.6	10.9***
CDMSES – occupational information	14.6	20.1	30.3	10.2***
CDMSES – plans for the future	21.4	26.9	32.6	5.6***

Note - * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to clarify the relationship between the work experience quality and students vocational development. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed that the quality of the internship predicts the changes observed in vocational development. The effects are small / moderate but give interesting hints for the significant role of contextual dimensions, mainly in what concerns the exploratory behavior and the decision making self-efficacy.

In sum, the students who perceived higher levels on the internship quality reported more exploratory activity (T1-T2). In line with our expectations, which were based on previous research (e.g. Araújo, 2007; Kenny & Bledsoe, 2005; Ketterson & Blustein, 1997; Kracke & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2001; Kracke, 2002) and on the vocational literature (e.g. Blustein, 1997; Flum & Blustein, 2000; Flum, 2001; Taveira, 2001), contextual qualities are significantly associated with the intensity of career exploration (T1-T2). Our results have some practical implications: a) teachers and guidance counsellors might facilitate the career development of high school students through the organization of work experiences with high standards of these contextual qualities.

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