

Brief Report

Facilitating Sustainable Career Development in Fragility: A Psycho-Linguistic Intervention for Employability of Individuals with Fragile Literacy Skills

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Abstract: The brief report examines the burgeoning interest in sustainable career development by discussing the role of employability of individuals with fragile literacy skills, i.e., second-language learners (L2), and individuals with developmental dyslexia (DD). Considering sustainable career development as the umbrella of practices facilitating individuals flourishing, we aim to present an integrated flexible intervention to promote the employability of individuals with fragile literacy skills (DD and L2) that combines both the promotion of linguistic skills and psychological resources. Using an experimental research design, we tested our training intervention on language skills (reading and writing) coupled with psychological training intended to enhance psychological resources and psychological capital. A total of 38 individuals with DD took part in our examination ($n = 22$ in the experimental group) and $n = 26$ L2 ($n = 11$ in the experimental group). We measured employability skills and psychological capital pre and post our interventions both in the control and in the experimental groups. Our result show that the intervention led to a significant improvement in L2 and DD. We discuss our results and implications for research and practice.

Keywords: employability; developmental language disorders; second-language learners; training; sustainable career



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1. Introduction

Employability is a topic of interest in most of the core areas of organizational psychology and in particular for the understanding of sustainable career development. The notion of employability covers both the individuals' actual ability and perception of being able to enter in the labor market, yet it also applies to the individuals ability to maintain their careers in the workplace [1–4].

Following this broad definition of employability, it should not be a surprise how employability had become a relevant topic for sustainable career development and especially in respect to specific populations, e.g., individuals with fragile literacy skills. Sustainable career development is an umbrella term that highlights the multiple challenges of contemporary society [5]. It recalls aspects of the current labor market and how individuals with specific needs can obtain a job and maintain their careers. This is the case of individuals with developmental dyslexia (DD) and second-language-learner migrants (L2), described as low-educated second language and literacy acquisition (LESLLA). These individuals might have different perceptions of their level of employability due to their language fragilities [6,7]. Such populations are considered fragile as the presence of language and literacy difficulties can relate to the low likelihood of finding and maintaining a job. In

the literature, there is only a limited amount of research on how to facilitate individuals with fragile literacy skills in their career development and particularly on how to sustain their level of employability. For example, existing research tends to limit the focus on the promotion of specific psychological skills or the promotion of linguistic skills [5–8].

Considering the umbrella of sustainable career development, it is imperative to address the topic of employability of fragile individuals and realize initial attempts to inform on how to sustain these individuals via training interventions [5,8–10]. On the one hand, the relevance of employability appears particularly in respect to the notion of career development sustainability, with employability being at the nexus of the very meanings of career, development, and sustainability [3]. On the other hand, employability applies to the notion of sustainable career of *fragile* individuals as an object of intervention to facilitate their career development [6,7]. International surveys and the scientific literature inform that individuals with dyslexia can have more difficulties in finding an occupation in today's labor market [11]. In addition to difficulties in verbal and written communication, DD individuals can also have complications in organization, time management, planning, and adaptation to change [12,13], as well as psychological worries such as the feeling of insecurity about their future and psychological resources [14]. For example, in Italy only 65.2% of DD individuals have an occupation, among which 19% is represented by the 19–25 years of age population. This is the same for L2 individuals who may find difficulties in verbal and written communication, addressing cultural barriers and adaptation to the labor context. In the Italian context, this is reflected in the 61.4% of migrants with an occupation (both formal and non-formal employment). Despite this contextual conditions, the literature still has a lack of understanding on how to sustain such populations in their career development.

In the present brief report, we aim to present and test the effectiveness of an integrated flexible intervention to promote the employability of individuals with fragile literacy skills (DD and L2) that combines both the promotion of linguistic skills and psychological resources. To sustain the career development of DLD and L2 individuals, the literature highlights specific intervention at the institutional level. This is the case of non-profit organizations and local educational authorities, working to offer training and education services to improve literacy skills. However, such institutional interventions may show a relative effectiveness in the view of the lack of psychological resources and linguistic gaps. Considering the contribution of the psychological literature, we argue that supporting individuals with fragile literacy skills can represent the means to facilitate a sustainable career development [15–17]. Ultimately, we suggest that by combining the promotion of literacy and language skills with the promotion of psychological resources, DD and L2 individuals can experience and perceive higher levels of employability that, in turn, can help them in the determination of employment opportunities.

In the rest of the report, we proceed as follows. First, we present the theoretical background concerning the promotion of employability with a specific focus on the individuals with DD and L2. Second, we continue with the methodological approaches and present our intervention, and the experimental procedure used. In this section, we report the results of our study meant to test the effectiveness of integrated flexible intervention to promote the employability of individuals with fragile literacy skills (DD and L2). We conclude by discussing our results and present future perspectives for research and practice in the field.

2. Facilitating Sustainable Career Development in DD and L2

Unsurprisingly, facilitating the sustainable career development of DD and L2 individuals highlights the importance of literacy skills as key drivers for the integration process and the increase in employability [6,7]. In this respect, the literacy process takes on a much broader meaning than just the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Literacy is not only about teaching reading and writing, but also about expressive skills to claim rights and negotiate meanings. Literacy is, thus, much more than the learning of a complex communication technique and reading–writing skills. It marks access to the universe of

relationships of an information-driven society in which writing is *an imperative medium* that, to a large extent, replaces direct interpersonal relationships and constitutes a powerful means of production, mediation, and circulation of social and cultural meanings.

Assuming this vision allows interventions, initiatives and training projects aimed at implementing this competence take on a broader characterization of a psychosocial nature, insofar as it is impossible not to include individual, social, and cultural dynamics and exclude the dual effect that adequate literacy exerts not only on the employment level but, in general, on the entire social and cultural apparatus, as well as on the wellbeing of the individual who benefits from it [6,7,12–14].

2.1. The Linguistic Perspective

Literacy skills, intended as the ability to read and spell fluently, as well as the comprehend written texts, extend far beyond formal education. The presence of difficulties in reading and writing that are observed in people with dyslexia and L2 learners can have a profound effect on both their cultural and professional life.

Studies on adults with dyslexia report that despite accumulating years of reading experience, DD still continue to face severe literacy as well as linguistic deficits, affecting, in particular, phonological awareness and lexical access, which, in turn, pose a substantial obstacle to effective reading comprehension [18–20]. Nevertheless, recent studies have also shown that it is possible to pursue an improvement in reading abilities also in adulthood. In a recent systematic review of the literature, Vender and colleagues [21] reported that a proper literacy intervention can provide sensible gains in reading and spelling skills in adults. The most effective treatments seem to be those that promote and integrate phonological and morphological training [22], as well as those that stimulate fluency by imposing time constraints on reading through computerized programs [23].

As for L2 learners, studies focusing on linguistic interventions are still rather limited and frequently based on practitioner observations rather than rigorous experimental testing. Efficient literacy development practices for such learners have been found to benefit significantly from a balanced and holistic approach, combining both bottom-up (i.e., starting covering letters, sound/symbol correspondences, and building up to words and sentences, emphasizing automatic recognition over understanding meaning) and top-down (beginning with recognizing common words and short sentences, and introducing letters and sounds later on) strategies [24,25]. Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics is crucial, helping learners to understand the relationship between letters and sounds, and develop decoding skills. This should be complemented with activities that promote vocabulary growth and comprehension skills, ensuring that learners are able to make meaning from text. Contextualized learning, where literacy skills are taught within the context of real-life situations, has also proven effective as it enhances the relevance of the learning material, thereby increasing learner motivation and engagement. Providing ample opportunities for practice, along with immediate feedback, further enhances skill acquisition and mastery [26].

2.2. The Psychosocial Perspective

Reviewing the general literature on psychosocial interventions for promoting employability, scholars have provided relative evidence concerning those interventions aim at fostering psychological resources [3]. This is the case of life-crafting intervention considered as one prominent, sustainable, and practical intervention that can be used independently of cultural differences and individuals' age and experience. In the literature [27], life-crafting intervention demonstrates a certain degree of effectiveness in helping individuals find purpose and set meaningful goals that represent core aspects of employability of individuals [3]. Individuals are trained to align their goals (e.g., finding a job opportunity) with values and interests (e.g., previous work experience, interests) and make concrete plans to work towards them. Moreover, the intervention has the potential to positively impact individuals' well-being, performance, and overall satisfaction with life by promoting core

psychological capital and psychological resources, which, ultimately, can increase the level of perceived employability [27–31].

Scholars have demonstrated the effectiveness of life-crafting intervention in study success, as evidenced by higher academic achievement and decreased dropout rates, particularly among ethnic minority and male students who had previously underperformed. The intervention helped students develop skills for self-management and management of others, and encouraged them to consider the impact they can have on the world [27,32].

In respect to the phases of life-crafting intervention, it consists of three stages. In the first stage, individuals are invited to reflect on their values and passions in various areas of life. This helps them gain clarity about what is important to them. In the second stage, they translate their values and passions into specific goals and formulate plans to achieve them. This stage emphasizes the importance of setting self-concordant goals, which are goals that align with one's values and interests. The third stage involves a photoshoot where individuals create a statement starting with "I WILL" that represents their commitment to their goals [27]. Moreover, considering the topic of employability, life-crafting intervention can be integrated with a specific phase in which participants present their curricula and develop awareness around their competences. This highlights the role of competences and education in promoting the perception of employability in addition to a sense of fulfillment and meaning [3,33].

3. Method

In the present study, we address the impetus to contribute to the definition of the notion of sustainable career development by considering the promotion of employability of fragile individuals. We do so by testing an interdisciplinary intervention developed by the integration of linguistic and psychological perspective. Then, our overreaching aim is to test the effectiveness of this mixed perspectives intervention for the promotion of literacy and psychosocial skills in order to promote the level of perceived employability in L2 subjects and DD.

We referred to the methodological ground described above and we designed an experimental studies. We created two groups for each of the fragile individuals' samples, i.e., L2 group and a DD, with a further internal division into experimental and control groups. The experimental groups of DD and L2 received both language and psychosocial training. The control group did not receive any training. In order to verify the effectiveness of the intervention, we measured the level of employability and psychological capital before and after the intervention for the experimental group, while for the control group we only administered the same questionnaire at two different times, i.e., one month apart.

Subsequently, we *analyzed* the data separately by running a series of *t*-tests for independent and paired samples in order to compare the control and experimental group within the two populations and for a time comparison, pre- and post-intervention.

3.1. Participants and Procedure

In total, $N = 64$ subjects took part in the study, of whom $n = 26$ were L2 (88.5% women, mean age 33.8, $SD = 7.98$) and $n = 38$ subjects with dyslexia (68.4% women, mean age 21.4, $SD = 3.19$). With regard to the L2 population, only $n = 11$ participants took part in the trial, while for the DD population, there were $n = 22$.

The procedure of our study lasted one year (from June 2022 to June 2023) and comprised recruitment and training interventions. Individuals were randomly assigned to the experimental or the control group. With respect to the recruitment stage, we followed different recruitment procedures for L2 and DD. The L2 subjects were recruited through local social promotion networks operating for the literacy of the immigrant population. In these terms, in parallel with the literacy activities, L2 subjects were offered the opportunity to participate in an individual psychosocial skills promotion course, on a voluntary basis. For the control group, on the other hand, they were asked to complete questionnaires during the lessons with the support of the researchers involved, before and one month after.

DD individuals were recruited through the use of advertisements disseminated on the university campus, via social networks (e.g., Facebook page of the authors' department) and via a snow-ball approach. Participation in the experimental group was on a voluntary basis for the identified population. For the control group, on the other hand, financial compensation was offered for their participation in the pre- and post-questionnaires at one-month intervals. All participants had independently received a diagnosis of dyslexia based on standard criteria; their reading and spelling skills were measured in the pre-test assessment, ensuring that all DD individuals, both of the experimental and of the control group, still experienced marked reading and spelling deficits in standardized reading tasks. Moreover, detailed information about their linguistic profile was collected by administering tasks assessing phonological and morphological awareness as well as lexical access skills.

With respect to the intervention, the linguistic training was administered through a web-application with literacy activities differentiated based on the participants' profile and their specific needs [34].

The training proposed to the DD participants aimed at enhancing reading speed and accuracy, as well as their spelling abilities and it involved the independent use of the app (on a computer, tablet, or smartphone) for three days a week (each session lasting approximately 15–20 min) for eight weeks, thus, for a total of 8 h for each participant. Different types of activities were developed and integrated in the program. However, the training was highly personalized and tailored to each participant, taking into account their needs and learning experience. This personalization was achieved by adjusting the advancement through different levels, with progression being permitted only when specific accuracy thresholds were successfully met (for more details on the intervention).

The training for L2 participants complemented their regular in-person attendance at Italian language courses with the use of a web application. Through this application, participants were offered activities primarily aimed at reinforcing reading and writing skills, as well as developing a basic vocabulary deemed beneficial for them. The intervention was structured over a total of eight weeks: each week, participants were presented with nine sets of activities organized around a thematic core. For each thematic core, ten lexical items that could be potentially useful in the daily lives of the learners (e.g., shopping for groceries, health, etc.) were introduced, which then served as the basis for the activities. In the item selection process, particular attention was devoted to the orthographic and syllabic complexity of the items, which increased as the intervention progressed. Consistent with the recommendations to combine and integrate bottom-up and top-down approaches, the activities always began with the presentation of whole words, then gradually shifted to sub-lexical units (syllables and individual phonemes/graphemes), before returning to focus on whole words again.

The psychological intervention consisted of two sessions of two hours per session during which we combined both life-crafting and competence mapping. The researchers involved started with competence mapping in order to collect the materials for the second session. Then, the researchers continued with the three phases of the life-crafting intervention (see the description in the previous section).

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona. Each participant was asked to read the information form and sign the consent to participate in the study and allow for the use and processing of the data by the researchers.

3.2. Measures

For the evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention, two traditional measurement instruments for assessing the level of employability were used: the Psychological Capital measure [35] and the employability scale [36], in Italian and English for L2.

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) measure comprises 24 items measured with a 5-point agreement scale (from 1 = not at all agree to 5 = totally agree). The measure

consists of four dimensions that contribute to the total psychological capital value: hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$).

The employability scale, on the other hand, consists of 27 items measured by a 5-point agreement scale (from 1 = do not agree at all to 5 = totally agree). The measure consists of 4 dimensions that contribute to the unique value of employability: social capital and networking, human capital and professional development, career identity and self-management, and environmental monitoring (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

3.3. Data Analytic Plan

To test the effectiveness of the treatment, we initially compared the measurements over time by means of paired-sample *t*-tests comparing the measurements at time 1 and time 2 in the experimental group for the two populations. We then compared the experimental groups with the control groups at time 1 and 2 by means of *t*-tests for independent samples. We carried out these analyses focusing initially on the individual sub-dimensions of the two measures and subsequently on the total scores. To run the analysis, we used SPSS v. 22.

4. Results

For the L2 sample, the experimental group shows significantly higher scores at time 2 than at time 1 on all dimensions considered except for human capital and professional development ($t(7) = 1.83, p = 0.06$) and environmental monitoring ($t(7) = 1.82, p = 0.06$) dimensions. On the other hand, for the dimensions of hope ($t(7) = 5.46, p = 0.001$), self-efficacy ($t(7) = 9.67, p = 0.001$), resilience ($t(7) = 4.57, p = 0.001$), and optimism ($t(7) = 4.40, p = 0.002$), as well as for the general dimension of psychological capital ($t(7) = 7.79, p = 0.001$), there are significantly higher scores. The same applies to the dimensions of employability and the level of employability itself ($t(7) = 5.21, p = 0.001$), specifically social capital and networking ($t(7) = 9.47, p = 0.001$) and the level of career identity and self-management ($t(7) = 4.46, p = 0.001$).

In the pre-intervention comparisons, the L2 sample shows that at time one both groups, experimental and control, are almost equal. At time two, on the other hand, the comparison between the two groups shows only one significant difference for the hope dimension for the experimental group ($t(17) = 1.81, p = 0.04$).

For the DD sample, the experimental group shows a significant increase for all dimensions after the intervention. For the dimensions hope ($t(21) = 2.49, p = 0.011$), self-efficacy ($t(21) = 2.57, p = 0.009$), resilience ($t(21) = 2.17, p = 0.02$), and optimism ($t(21) = 1.69, p = 0.05$), as well as for the general dimension of psychological capital ($t(21) = 2.80, p = 0.005$), there are significantly higher scores. The same is true for the dimensions of employability and the level of employability itself ($t(21) = 4.33, p = 0.001$), specifically social capital and networking ($t(21) = 3.92, p = 0.001$), human capital and professional development ($t(21) = 3.92, p = 0.001$), environmental monitoring ($t(21) = 3.90, p = 0.001$). and the level of career identity and self-management ($t(21) = 2.65, p = 0.001$).

In the pre-intervention comparisons, the DD sample shows that at time 1, both groups, experimental and control, are equal except for human capital and professional development dimension ($t(36) = 4.32, p = 0.001$), with a higher score in the control sample and for the environmental monitoring dimension ($t(36) = 4.07, p = 0.001$), again with higher scores for the control group. Likewise, the control sample shows a higher total level of psychological capital ($t(36) = 1.61, p = 0.001$) as well as a higher level of total employability ($t(36) = 4.20, p = 0.001$). Thus, in the post-intervention comparison, no significant differences are found between the two groups. Looking at the comparison between time 1 and time 2 of the control sample, it can be seen that there are no statistically significant scores for any of the dimensions considered.

5. Discussion

The present work aimed at contributing to the critical understanding of the notion of sustainable career development by providing evidence of the effectiveness of an interdis-

disciplinary intervention for the promotion of the employability of individuals with fragile literacy skills. We realized a training intervention combining two separate disciplinary approaches, i.e., psychological and linguistic. Using an experimental research design, we tested our interventions in two separate groups of DD and L2 and compared their level of employability with respective control groups. Results of paired and independent *t*-test show that our interdisciplinary intervention had led to an increase in the level of employability.

5.1. Theoretical Contribution

In our intervention to support the employability of such individuals, we focused on both linguistic and psychological aspects through which we aimed at promoting both literacy skills and psychological resources and psychological capital.

In the L2 sample, our analyses show that the experimental group have significantly higher levels at time 2 (i.e., after the intervention) for all the dimensions considered except for the *human capital and professional development* and *environmental monitoring* dimensions of employability. On the other hand, the dimensions hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, as well as the general dimension of psychological capital, have significantly higher scores. The same applies to the dimensions of general *employability* with higher levels for the dimensions of social capital and networking and career identity and self-management. In the pre-intervention comparisons, the scores obtained by both groups (experimental and control) are almost equal in the first treatment, while the subsequent comparison between the two groups (post-intervention) shows a significant difference for the dimension hope in the experimental one. We can explain such results by considering the numerosity of the control group. It is interesting to note that both the promotion of literacy skills coupled with psychological resources results in an increase not only of employability perception but also in the dimension of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism. These appear as crucial elements for such individuals, who may perceive themselves as not able to deal with the labor market [24,25,27–33].

With respect to the DD sample, the experimental group shows a significant increase for all the general dimensions of psychological capital and employability and their sub-dimensions. In the pre-intervention comparisons, the scores of both groups (experimental and control) are the same except for the dimensions of human capital and professional development and environmental monitoring, which, together with the total level of psychological capital and *employability*, are higher in the control group. In the post-intervention comparison, there are no statistically significant scores for any of the dimensions considered. Considering that the experimental group has independently lower levels of skills with respect to the control group, this absence of differences in the post-test assessment is taken as evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention proposed to the former. Despite this, it is interesting to note the effect of the combined promotion of psychological resources with literacy skills in the experimental group, which has significantly increased their level of employability and psychological capital. This highlights the importance of a tandem work of two separate trainings that can help in facilitating the employability of fragile individuals [22–24,30–33].

5.2. Limitations and Future Directions

In both the DD and L2 groups, we found that the control group's total psychological capital and employability levels already showed high levels for both dimensions. This suggests that the results of the comparison should be taken with caution and, at the same time, not be assumed to invalidate the intervention, given the significance found at time 1 and 2 in the experimental sample. Furthermore, in both the L2 sample and the DD sample, the number of participants in the experimental and control group are unbalanced, resulting in a higher participation in the control group and, thus, indicating the potential effect of the sample size. In parallel, our study is limited by the total number of participants, which is not representative.

Despite the sample size and distribution of the two populations, these results suggest that initiatives such as interdisciplinary intervention may be effective in supporting a number of personal resources that are important in enabling adults and young adults with low literacy skills to enter into the labor market and better adapt in the workplace [6,7,12–14]. Strengthening such resources can enable an improvement in real and perceived levels of employability. Therefore, while acknowledging the methodological limitations given by the sample, the results of this study are a first attempt in demonstrating that interventions aimed at strengthening psychological resources, in particular each person's psychological capital, could bring about significant improvements in those individuals disadvantaged in the workplace, for example, by increasing self-confidence, self-control, proactivity, and stress management even when faced with work demands that require reading and writing skills and induce personal discomfort. Future research and practice can consider these initial results for interventions aimed at facilitating sustainable career development of fragile individuals.

6. Conclusions

The present study follows the vast supporting literature that contributes to understanding sustainable career development [5,8–10]. It achieved this by addressing the promotion of employability in populations characterized by fragile literacy skills, i.e., young adult subjects suffering from DD and subjects who, due to their migratory background, have learned Italian as a second language (L2) in a migrant context and with low literacy. Linguistic competence, literacy, and comprehension of texts constitute areas of fragility for these populations and can lead to a disadvantage when entering in the labor market. Furthermore, these difficulties can also have implications on the individual dimension, i.e., translate into a perception of oneself as an individual with characteristics that are unsuitable for the workplace and, consequently, negatively affect overall employability levels. This study can help advance the idea that supporting psychological resources of DD and L2 individuals can be effective in increasing their perceived and actual employability if combined with literacy interventions.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Verona (March 2021).

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical.

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