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# Career readiness in deaf and hard-of-hearing high school students in special education

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*Introduction*. A successful career is one of the key factors that ensure meaningful social integration for people with disabilities. Considering that career choices are made by adolescents immediately after graduation from high school, it is vital that special schools' career guidance programs effectively address typical challenges for each type of disability. *Objectives*. The aim of this study was to examine career readiness in deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) high school students educated in special schools in Russia and reveal gaps and specific challenges that could be addressed through tailored guidance programs. *Methods*. Two studies on career readiness were conducted, involving a total of 410 participants, including DHH high school students (N = 205) and high school students without hearing impairment (N = 205). *Results*. Findings indicated statistically reliable differences in career readiness, intensity of career preferences, and range of professional domains of interest between DHH students and their hearing peers. Qualitative results supported earlier observations about the vulnerable position of young DHH people in making career choices. *Conclusion*. The identified challenges in career readiness among DHH high school students allowed us to justify urgent directions for their career guidance, including self-awareness, awareness of professional domain and labor market, and the ability to align individual health issues with occupational demands.

*Keywords:* career guidance, career readiness, high school students, hearing impairment

## Introduction

The following rights of people with disabilities are ensured and protected by major initiatives of UN specialized agencies: the right to accessible quality education (UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, 1960;

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UNESCO Inclusion and education: all means all, 2020); the right to full access to education, training, culture and information (UNESCO Sunberg Declaration, 1981), the right to career guidance, vocational training, and employment (ILO Convention on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, 1983), the right to social assistance and support (UNICEF Social Inclusion people with disabilities, 2024). To implement these rights, the participating countries create conditions for accessible vocational education and the labor market, and develop special career guidance programs for persons with disabilities (Mirzabalaeva & Pashkova, 2024). Career guidance interventions encourage a person's career choices by fostering career readiness (Zeer et al., 2005) – understood here as a system of motivational, cognitive, operational, and reflective components (Zenina, 2012).

The importance of career guidance research is proven by numerous studies in this field. A systematic review by Soares et al. (2022) analyzed scientific papers on career guidance research published between 2000 and 2021; the geographical scope of the review included 11 countries. The authors focused on preferred career guidance modalities, domains, and the effect of interventions. According to the review, in the international career guidance practice, the most common learning outcomes are decision-making skills in career choices, career planning competence, and a positive attitude towards the chosen field. It is reported that the effect of career guidance interventions is not associated with time or session numbers. At the same time, the variety of domains is an important factor to consider. The authors point out that most of the published studies overlook vulnerable groups of students, including students with disabilities, and emphasize the need for focused research in this area (Soares et al., 2022).

Several authors have proposed conceptual approaches for school-based career guidance. Altukhov et al. (2007) describe informational, diagnostic, counselling, developmental, and activating approaches, whereas Pryazhnikov (2005) suggests the construction of a "personal professional perspective". Kondratyuk et al. (2023) explore the methodology of developing career plans with high school students, emphasizing the influence of conscious self-regulation and career adaptability on the determination and stability concerning their professional and academic plans.

A number of studies discuss the challenges faced by adolescents when transitioning from school to higher education. Hoff et al. (2022) point to aligning personal aspirations with labor-market realities. Chen et al. (2022) mention limited knowledge of career-planning processes in Chinese college students. As Croatian high school students associate a lack of career readiness with insufficient or inconsistent information, Sverko et al. (2016) advocate introducing career guidance programs for high school students. Maggio et al. (2020) highlight the role of state personal and social hope in career construction

and suggest that career interventions for adolescents should be based on the life design approach. When exploring gender differences in Swedish adolescents' career choices, Tellhed et al. (2018) reveal strong gender differences in ability beliefs and explain the appeal of gender-balanced programs.

The need to develop specialized career guidance programs for students with disabilities is emphasized in several studies (Bukina et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2022). Researchers emphasize the importance of forward-looking initiatives (Alekhina, 2016) and providing sufficient information (Volkova et al., 2019). However, few studies focus on developing career competence in deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) high school students, although there is evidence that, compared to their hearing peers, DHH individuals tend to be less educated and face higher unemployment and underemployment rates (Punch et al., 2004). Furthermore, a recent study in 408 emerging adults from two Chinese higher institutions revealed that DHH individuals frequently encounter challenges in career decision-making, with professional uncertainty being inversely associated with high self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Yuan et al., 2022). When analyzing this problem, the authors identify knowledge and skills gaps that may hinder successful career development. Furlonger (1998) underlines gaps in communication skills that are important for employment in the social and entrepreneurial spheres. Nagle et al. (2016) conclude that DHH high school students prefer subjects and assignments that contribute to practical skills rather than theoretical and academic knowledge, which further prevents them from pursuing advanced studies. Many researchers also highlight a lack of reading comprehension (Kuntze et al., 2023) and writing skills (Krasavina et al., 2025).

Punch et al. (2006) revealed career barriers perceived by DHH adolescents. In addition to issues related to difficult professional duties, DHH high school students have concerns about the workplace attitudes, possible misunderstandings, group communication (communication with several interlocutors), and occupational inaccessibility. When analyzing the factors influencing the career decisions of DHH high school graduates, Danermark et al. (2001) conclude that competent career guidance is of greater importance for university enrolment than social factors or factors related to the degree of hearing loss (given normal intellectual capacity). These results are consistent with the results of further studies (Punch et al., 2005), where authors identify vital areas of career guidance for DHH students including detailed information about particular occupations, medical contraindications and possible solutions for difficulties associated with hearing impairment; opportunities for further education and career development; assertiveness trainings; raising awareness in parents, teachers and high school DHH students to increase career expectations. To conclude this section, the literature review confirms career guidance to be a topic of interest for international research, with a considerable number of authors agreeing on the need for focused research on vulnerable groups. However, there

is a lack of recent empirical studies on designing career guidance programs for DHH students that are compliant with their special needs and current challenges.

## Objective

The aim of this study was to examine career readiness in DHH high school students educated in special schools in Russia and reveal gaps and specific challenges that could be addressed through tailored career guidance programs. The first part of the study focused on general career readiness. The second part included an assessment of the intensity of career preferences and the number of professional interest domains.

## Methods

### Research design

The research implied two studies on different aspects of career readiness involving DHH high school students and their hearing peers. Data were collected through surveys and then analyzed and compared using an independent-samples t-test. Both surveys were linguistically adapted to improve comprehension among DHH high school students. Written consent to participate in the research was obtained from all participants; for minors, the consent was signed by their legal representatives.

### Study 1

Career readiness is considered to be a complex concept involving a person's knowledge, skills, strategies, and behaviors related to career choices (Dodd et al., 2022). Therefore, our choice of career readiness measure was justified by a holistic approach, where career readiness was analyzed in several aspects: motivation, career awareness, barrier awareness, and behavior (Pryazhnikov, 2005), as shown in Table 1. The questionnaire included 10 open-ended questions addressing these aspects. The design of the questionnaire allowed us to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Comments were analyzed with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), implying open coding to reveal parameters and scales related to categories, which were identified deductively. This process involved two coders: a career guidance counselor and a career psychologist; discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion. Each answer was also evaluated with a 5-point scale, assessing the answer integrity. Sum scores classified participants into low, medium, or high career readiness levels.

## Study 2

To examine career preferences, we used a quantitative survey (Shmelev, 2020). The methodology included assessing participants' preferences in the following areas: engineering, artistic creativity, communication and interaction, service and assistance, management, information, and nature. The participants had to assess their interests in these spheres on a 10-point scale. The survey scales allowed us to assess the intensity of career preferences and the number of professional interest domains, and assess career preferences as: low (interested in 4-5 professional spheres), medium (interested in 2-3 professional spheres), or high (1 predominant professional sphere).

**Table 1**

*Career readiness questionnaire: aspects*

| Aspects | Categories | |
|---|---|---|
| Motivation | 1. | Recognizing the significance of career readiness |
| | 2. | Prevalent motives for career choices |
| | 3. | Career preferences |
| Career awareness | 4. | Self-awareness |
| | 5. | Labor market awareness |
| | 6. | Professional domain awareness |
| | 7. | Independent information search skills |
| Barrier awareness | 8. | Assessment of internal and external challenges |
| Behavior | 9. | Establishing short-term career goals |
| | 10. | Planning actions to overcome difficulties |

## Data collection

The study involved 410 high school students (205 DHH high school students with medically confirmed hearing impairment, and 205 high school hearing students matched for age, grade, and region). Data was collected during career guidance group meetings organized in special schools and universities in 5 regions of the Russian Federation: the Republic of Bashkortostan, the Republic of Mari El, the Udmurt Republic, the Kirov and Orenburg regions. All DHH participants attended special schools, suffered from moderate to profound hearing loss, and were bilingual, with predominant communication in sign language.

## Results

### Study 1

#### *Quantitative Results*

Descriptive statistics related to career readiness in DHH high school students (group 1) and high school students with no hearing impairment (group 2) are presented in Table 2. The t-test showed a statistically reliable difference between the scores of students with and without hearing impairment ($t(408) = 11.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.14$). Table 3 presents summary data on career readiness levels in DHH students (Group 1) and students with no hearing impairment (Group 2).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive statistics for the career readiness survey*

| Group | N, students | M ±SED | Median | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 (DHH students) | 205 | 2.80±1.17 | 3 | 1.367 |
| Group 2 | 205 | 3.95±0.97 | 4 | 0.952 |

**Table 3**

*Summary data for career readiness levels*

| Criteria | Level of career readiness | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High | | Average | | Low | |
| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 1 | Group 2 |
| Students, % | 24.9 | 65.9 | 35.1 | 22.0 | 40.0 | 12.1 |

#### *Qualitative Results*

When analyzing qualitative survey data, the comments were divided into categories, and then parameters and scales were derived to describe the related trends. The categories were defined by the design of the career readiness questionnaire. The coders identified different trends among DHH participants and their hearing peers.

#### *Motivation*

The analysis revealed that DHH participants lacked a clear understanding of the need to make career choices, and expressed uncertainty about their professional future as they described it in general terms, showed doubts about

career choices, or had not decided on a career field yet. The prevailing motives for career choices in DHH students were the avoidance of failure (preference for jobs perceived as "simple and easy to learn"), financial status, and prestige. Commonly selected careers included those of an engineer, programmer, teacher, psychologist, pharmacist, coach, and a designer, which rather confirms some stereotypical professional choices. At the same time, the vast majority of DHH participants had not decided on a higher or further education institution, which hindered career planning.

In contrast, participants without hearing impairment displayed significantly different patterns. The majority of hearing students have decided on a career field, noting that their career choices are based on their hobbies and interests, and involve opportunities for promotion and financial well-being. Commonly selected jobs included: programmer, advertising specialist, engineer, doctor - careers typically perceived as prestigious. Hearing students specified which universities they would apply to for admission, and had several alternative options.

### *Career awareness*

Findings revealed low career awareness in both DHH and hearing participants, with one exception: students without hearing impairments exhibited a higher level of professional domain awareness. They provided a detailed description of the roles and responsibilities associated with their future career choices and could articulate the rationale behind their choices. Hearing students indicated that they were aware of their own traits and abilities, referring to the results of professional and personal assessments. Their evaluation of a career's relevance was based on publicly available data and university admission trends. Hearing students justified the need to analyze the national labor market and expressed willingness to relocate for study or work, demonstrating a broader, more flexible career outlook.

In contrast, when writing about a professional domain, DHH high school students tended to rely on their limited experience, such as school-based career tests. When analyzing personal traits and abilities, DHH students often identified only health issues, but struggled to relate them to professional demand, for example, choosing jobs that require excellent speaking skills (e.g., teaching, psychology). Common answers indicated difficulties in labor market assessment, and DHH students' unawareness of career relevance. When searching for information, they relied on social surroundings (parental and peers' opinions), and expected teachers to provide all the information about further education.

### *Barrier awareness*

Most participants across both groups demonstrated the ability to anticipate potential challenges, commonly referring to external obstacles. Both DHH and hearing participants noted high competition for admission, and indicated limited financial resources when considering fee-based education. Reported internal difficulties included test anxiety related to taking graduation/ entrance exams.

Additionally, barriers mentioned by DHH students included a lack of accessible information regarding appropriate career paths, academic programs, and admission requirements for students with disabilities. Notably, about one-third of DHH participants refused to answer or admitted that they had not considered potential obstacles at all.

### *Behavior*

DHH students are aware of ways to overcome obstacles, noting that they need support in preparing for entrance exams and navigating the application process. At the same time, they admitted having difficulties in planning real actions to overcome obstacles and expressed uncertainty about how to begin taking steps toward their goals.

High school students without hearing impairment not only recognized additional exam preparation (e.g., tutoring) but also demonstrated readiness for independent information gathering and self-directed learning. Most hearing students have already decided on a plan that includes attending university events (such as University Open Days, Olympiads, and career workshops) and have already made choices about exam preparation (e.g., tutoring or self-study).

## Study 2

Descriptive statistics related to career preferences in DHH high school students (group 1) and high school students with no hearing impairment (group 2) are presented in Tables 4 and 5. Table 4 presents data on the intensity of career preferences, and Table 5 presents data on the range of professional domains of interest.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive statistics for career preferences intensity (interest across domains)*

| Group | N, students | M ±SED | Median | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 (DHH students) | 205 | 5.36±1.44 | 5.4 | 2.088 |
| Group 2 | 205 | 6.41±1.91 | 7.0 | 3.640 |

**Table 5**

*Descriptive statistics for the range of professional domains of interest (number of domains)*

| Group | N, students | M ±SED | Median | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1 (DHH students) | 205 | 2.95±1.43 | 3.0 | 2.060 |
| Group 2 | 205 | 2.0±1.23 | 1.5 | 1.507 |

The t-test for career preferences intensity (interest across domains) showed a statistically reliable difference between the scores of students with and without hearing impairment ($t$ (408) = 6.69, $p < .001$, $d = 0.66$). The t-test for the range of professional domains of interest (number of domains) also showed a statistically reliable difference between the scores of students with and without hearing impairment ($t$ (408) = 6.97, $p < .001$, $d = 0.69$). Table 6 reports summary data for levels of career preferences assessment in DHH students (Group 1) and students with no hearing impairment (Group 2).

**Table 6**

*Career preferences assessment in DHH and hearing high school students*

| Criteria | Career preferences level | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High | | Medium | | Low | |
| | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 1 | Group 2 |
| Students, % | 20.9 | 62.0 | 63.9 | 24.9 | 15.2 | 13.1 |

Findings revealed that only 21% of DHH participants and 62% of hearing participants demonstrated a high interest in a single field. Interests of DHH students clustered around domains of information (preference for working with documents, texts, data, and numbers) and engineering (preference for working with technical devices, driving vehicles, manufacturing, and construction). Career preferences of hearing students were more diverse. Along with a high interest in information and engineering, students showed interest in scientific research and analytical work, working with people, and management. 64% of DHH students and 25% of hearing students showed medium interest spread across two to three fields, which is an age-typical but non-decisive pattern. Low interest across all fields was recorded in 15% (Group 1) and 13% (Group 2) of students.

## Discussion

Statistically reliable differences in career readiness, intensity of career preferences and a range of professional interest domains, as well as qualitative results, support earlier observations about vulnerable position of young DHH people in making career choices (Punch et al., 2004) and vocational identity

(Yuan et al., 2022), especially those who study in special schools and lack massive communication with hearing peers. The findings about DHH high school students in Russia revealed that although many of them express an interest in pursuing higher education, the majority experience significant difficulties in making their first career choices, including choosing an educational institution. DHH high school pupils educated in special schools in Russia lack the ability to connect specific careers with educational programs or to develop a clear strategy for obtaining professional qualifications. They often face uncertainty and struggle to formulate coherent professional plans. Their understanding of the labor market relevance of chosen careers is limited. These students tend to rely on their immediate social circle for support and guidance, often not recognizing the potential benefits of professional career counseling. These findings suggest that career guidance programs for DHH high schoolers in Russia should focus both on raising career awareness and motivational support. This includes guidance in structured career planning, raising awareness about accessible education, the active involvement of parents and teachers, and engagement through interactive activities such as professional trials, mentorship sessions with graduates with disabilities, and hands-on workshops.

Another difficulty revealed in this study is a problem of DHH participants' personal self-awareness, including a lack of insight into personal strengths, aspirations, and confidence. These conclusions are supported by previous research, including studies of Punch et al. (2006), Simonova et al. (2021), and others. This study also revealed that the professional interests of DHH high school pupils are scattered across multiple fields. While a broad range of interests may offer flexibility, it also hinders the identification of a focused career and prevents setting short and long-term career goals.

Our findings reinforce the importance of tailoring career guidance for DHH students considering their health conditions, informational gaps, specific needs, and the realities of the regional labor market (Volkova et al., 2019). The identified challenges in career readiness among DHH high school students in Russia allowed us to justify key directions for their career guidance: raising awareness of personal traits and career requirements; providing detailed information about the relevance and scope of professions; providing detailed information about accessible educational programs; teaching how to align individual health issues with occupational demands; teaching how to match careers with suitable educational programs and one's own educational background. Thus, the study provides empirical support for previous conclusions on the scope of career guidance programs intended for DHH high school students (Punch et al., 2004) and on the need for collaboration among school and university career counseling specialists, social institutions, employment services, and the students' families (Bonkalo et al., 2015). Comprehensive professional diagnostics of career readiness should be followed by the development of tailored career guidance

programs that would help DHH individuals develop their career awareness and make career choices based on personal goals, self-awareness, labor market, professional domain awareness, and career planning skills.

## Conclusions

The problem of developing comprehensive and effective career guidance programs for DHH high school students is a pressing issue that lacks recent empirical research. Our study allowed us to highlight the main gaps in career readiness and thus identify career guidance domains that should be prioritized. DHH students must receive proper career guidance, including motivational support, raising self-awareness, career awareness, barrier awareness, and developing practical skills in career planning. Identifying prior challenges should be included as the first step in career guidance programs, followed by introducing tailored interventions to address the problems. Individual counseling focusing on a specific career field would provide a deeper understanding and confidence about the career choice that has been made. Such tailored career guidance programs are especially crucial for DHH students studying in special schools, given their limited experience in communication and social interactions.

The present study has some limitations considering the sampling methodology. It could be regarded as an exploratory study offering the basis for the design of more empirical studies involving DHH students from different regions worldwide, taking into consideration their ethnicity and culture. It will allow us to clarify and generalize conclusions for the population of deaf and hard-of-hearing high school pupils who attend special schools.

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# Stručna (profesionalna) spremnost gluvih i nagluvih srednjoškolaca u specijalnom obrazovanju

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*Uvod*: Uspešna karijera je jedan od ključnih faktora koji obezbeđuju smislenu socijalnu integraciju osoba sa invaliditetom. S obzirom na to da adolescenti biraju struku odmah nakon završetka srednje škole, od vitalnog je značaja da se kroz programe stručnog usmeravanja u specijalnim školama efikasno rešavaju izazovi tipični za svaku vrstu invaliditeta. *Ciljevi*: Cilj ove studije je da ispita stručnu spremnost gluvih i nagluvih (GN) srednjoškolaca koji se školuju u specijalnim školama. *Metode*: Sprovedene su dve studije o stručnoj spremnosti, u kojima je učestvovalo ukupno 410 učesnika, uključujući GN učenike srednjih škola sa oštećenim sluhom (N = 205) i učenike bez oštećenja sluha (N = 205). *Rezultati*: Rezultati su ukazali na statistički pouzdane razlike u stručnoj spremnosti, intenzitetu naklonosti ka određenim strukama i rasponu profesionalnih oblasti interesovanja između GN učenika i njihovih vršnjaka koji čuju. Kvalitativni rezultati su, takođe, potvrdili ranija zapažanja o ranjivom položaju GN mladih pri izboru karijere. *Zaključak*: Identifikovani izazovi vezani za stručnu spremnost među GN učenicima srednjih škola omogućili su nam da opravdamo hitne mere za njihovo stručno usmeravanje, uključujući samosvest, svest o stručnim domenima i tržištu rada, kao i mogućnost usklađivanja individualnih zdravstvenih problema sa zahtevima zanimanja.

*Ključne reči:* stručno usmeravanje, stručna (profesionalna) spremnost, srednjoškolci, oštećenje sluha.

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