

Paper

KAV conference 2017: *Transitions, career learning and career management skills. Multi-disciplinary and critical perspectives*

Author: *Inga H. Andreassen*, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences ihan@hvl.no

Taking career competences for granted?

Introduction

Giving young people opportunities to learn career management during their education, the skills can help them with their career aspirations and even reduce the risk of early school leaving. Thus, CMS might be a tool to prevent exclusion from the labour market, which many young people are currently facing.

Keywords

Career aspirations, self, transitions, career management skills (CMS), adolescence

Research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

This paper is based on data from a longitudinal qualitative research study conducted to shed some light on how adolescents think about their future career and career choices (Andreassen, 2016). Career aspirations, occupational conceptualization, personal values and the career decision-making process are keywords that describe some of the main issues of the investigation.

In this paper, we will look into how career aspirations and self-concept were expressed through the participants' narratives during the research period, as well as how they manage to navigate their career aspirations without help from school staff or counsellors, not aware of that they could benefit from CMS. How do the adolescents manage different kinds of transitions in the aspirations as their self-concept develops?

The concept of career transitions often refers to transitions between school levels or from school to work. But there are also other forms of transitions that are quite important during adolescence, such as transitions from idealistic to more realistic aspirations. By career aspirations we mean an individual's point-in-time expressions of educational and occupational goals (Johnson, 1995; Rojewski, 2005). The aspirations can be either ideal or realistic; the ideal aspirations reflect career goals given ideal conditions, while realistic career aspirations reflect the perceived likelihood for

entering a particular education or occupation. During adolescence, the idealistic aspirations are adapted through more realistic expectations of what is actually reachable (Lee & Rojewski, 2012).

The self has been emphasized in career theories ever since Parsons described three factors in the choice of a vocation where “a clear understanding of yourself” (Parsons, 1909, p.5) is one of them. The self is dynamic and is often described as how we view and construct our self (Nygård, 2007). It includes self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-worth and it is influenced by our social contexts. Our choices, conscious or unconscious, decide how much and in what way the context affects our self-concept, depending on the significance of situations and on the individual’s resilience and self-regulation.

The self has four core dimensions (Judge et al., 1998; Judge et al., 2002). Firstly, *self-esteem* that has an effect on learning, feeling of happiness and satisfaction. Secondly, *self-efficacy* that is the strength of one’s beliefs in reaching goals and completing tasks. Self-efficacy affects decision-making and the effort on reaching goals and resist on difficulties. Thirdly, *locus of control*, that implies to what extent we think we can control what happens and how we explain when events do not go as planned. Last, the negative dimension of self, *neuroticism*, that is characterized by anxiety, worries, dependency and helplessness. Individuals who score high on neuroticism tend to have high demands on what they consider as good enough.

Language is a central tool for reflections on experience; and reflections contribute in the construction of the self. The language constructs and constitutes social realities (Savickas, 2011). To reflect, we need experiences, particularly interpersonal experiences. The self and self-knowledge is constructed through an active process in collaboration with others, and it develops as a result of reflections through language and experiences. Therefore, self is shaped by culture, constituted in a social context and expressed by language (Savickas, 2002, 2011).

Gottfredson (1981) describes how the self-concept and occupational aspirations go through a parallel development in four phases, as the individuals circumscribe and compromise their aspirations to their self-concept and the realities in the world of work. She claims that “(P)eople may not be able to articulate their self-concepts, nor may their self-perceptions always be accurate, but they act on them and protect them just the same” (Gottfredson, 2002, p. 88).

Method

Nine Icelandic and Norwegian adolescents were followed through their lower and secondary education (age 13-19) to investigate their thoughts on future career. The sample was a combination of purposeful sample and snowball sample, and included five girls and four boys who had just started their 8th year in 10 years of compulsory education.

The investigation was organized through three phases. In the first phase, the participants received a list of open-ended questions and themes, all related to their thoughts on future career, and were asked to write an essay about it. In the second phase, a semi-structured interview guide was developed after the essay analysis and a literature review. The participants were then in the end of their first term in upper secondary school and were interviewed individually. In the third phase, a new semi-structured interview guide, based on data analysis and further literature review, was used. Most of the participants were then in their last term in upper secondary education, one in the first year of university studies and one had left school and was working in the fishing industry. All were interviewed individually. A five-point Likert-scale was used to help the participants indicate a degree of agreement or disagreement in a part of the interview.

The field investigated is complex, including causalities, variables and processes. The participants' reality varies according to contextual factors, which is of great importance. By using mixed methods in the data collection (essays, semi-structured interviews and Likert-scaling), it is possible to gather more data than by using only one method and the research can provide informative, compete and useful results (Johnson, 2016).

Results

During transitions between school levels, students got different feedback on their work as the demands and school culture change. This affected their self-concept and motivation for learning in different ways as a stressing element or as a challenge to overcome.

From time to time, the participants faced resistance or difficulties related to their career aspirations. They used different approaches when facing this, but all showed forms of adaptability and agency with initiatives that they felt as acceptable. Their knowledge and awareness increases on their own strengths, limitations, interests, values, aptitudes and personality. This contributes to both confirming and compromises in their career aspirations and has an impact on transitions between idealistic and realistic aspirations.

When their aspirations were challenged, they used different types of strategies to cope with this. Based on the data, three categories for their strategies were outlined; *adaptations*, *new solutions* and *withdrawal*. Each participant used strategies within one or more of the categories.

New and increased self-insight sometimes felt painful, as the adolescents realized limitations in reaching their aspirations. Three (out of nine) scored higher than the group's average on stress related to career choices; they also scored lower than average when evaluating their interests and strengths.

The participants said they had not had any counselling in school. This is hard to understand as the schools have regulations by law on career counselling. Career or CMS were not mentioned in any school subject (one single exception). One could wonder if career aspirations and career planning are considered as private matters, independent of the education provided. This seems quite strange in the light of ongoing discussions about better match between education choices and labour marked needs (OECD, 2014), dropout and social exclusion. Does the school take the students' CMS for granted?

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