Can you hear the people sing? Quality-development in career guidance in Norwegian Schools: A study on the importance of awareness of different voices

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Quality assurance and development are pivotal issues in Career Guidance services. There is an assumption in my project that there is an ongoing power struggle on how quality, as concept, ontologically ought to be understood between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. The project aims at building a holistic, rich and nuanced model of the multitude of understandings of the concept of quality in career guidance services in a school context. I propose a systemic model of the interrelatedness in understandings of quality in career guidance in a school context, based on a critical realistic influenced grounded theory approach.

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Introduction

> Very few people would disagree that good career guidance is critical if young people are to raise their aspirations and capitalize on the opportunities available to them. Yet equally few people would say that all is well with the current system of career guidance in this country. It is especially regrettable therefore that the current situation, in which so many young people are kept in the dark about the full range of options open to them, has been allowed to persist for so many years.
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> (Gatsby, 2014:2)

This article summarizes a PhD project on career guidance services in a Norwegian school context. The overall purpose of this project is adding research-based knowledge to the ongoing development and assessment of career guidance services. It advocates an increased awareness on different representations concerning the aim of guidance for adolescents, and the consequences this will have on the organizational and procedural aspects of guidance. Further, I argue for the importance of a 'deep' awareness towards underlying societal mechanism generating the representations. I will argue for an integrative and eclectic understanding, both inside and between different subsystems of a society.

Introduction to the phenomena of interest

Guidance has received increasing attention at international, European, and national levels during the past 15 years (Council of the European Union, 2004 and 2008; Kunnskapsdepartementet, ONR 2016; OECD, 2004a; Plant, 2012). In Europe, the need for national systems providing accessible and professional guidance services has been highlighted (ELGPN, 2012 and 2015). Further, a need for a special focus on services for young people has been emphasized (Borbély-Pecze and Hutchinson, 2013; Oomen and Plant, 2014; Gysbers and Henderson, 2012). Regarding the potential impact of guidance provision in schools, Hooley (2014: 36) makes the following concluding comments: 'The evidence base for careers work in schools is probably one of the best-developed elements of the overall lifelong guidance evidence base.' Despite this apparently strong agreement on the importance, arguments for a well-developed evidence base, and promising initiatives at a European policy

level, Hughes (2013) argues that the situation for career guidance has worsened in recent times. This aligns with the essence in the introductory quotation to this article (Gatsby, 2014: 2). Patton and McMahon (2014: 325) further elaborate this by saying: 'For over two decades, career practitioners in schools have faced issues such as timetable overcrowding resulted in limited time for career learning, limited budgets, limited support and ill-defined role definitions'. They continue by saying: 'career education and guidance programs are often viewed as extra-curricular activities taking time away from the curriculum that really matters'.

These apparently contradicting understandings of what 'we' want of the guidance provision for young people, what 'we' know about its potential private and public impact (Watts, 1999), and the description of the experience of provision, triggered my curiosity. In my project I am questioning why a service, highly regarded both among policy makers, researchers and users seems to struggle with defining a clear vision? My initial assumption was that it had to do with a fundamental issue related to different representations of what good service mean. This led to the following preliminary research questions:

- What is the problem represented to be for different stakeholders, users and beneficiaries, and in theories, research and policy documents relevant for school based career guidance services in a Norwegian context?

- What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

- What effects (organizational and procedural solutions) are produced by this representation of the problem?

- What representations are 'silenced' in the current dialogue about the problem and its solutions?

A critical realistic influenced systemic theoretical framework

Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent (2014) recommend starting a research process with an immanent critique

of existing research and theory, with an aim to find potential contradictions, ambivalence or inconsistency in the present understanding of the phenomena of interest. According to Skorikov and Patton (2007) and Patton and McMahon (2014), there has been little development in relevant theory concerning adolescents career development, services provided to support them, and the connection between the two issues. Their recommendation is that a Meta-theoretical approach would be appropriate for future research. Further, Senge (1990) advocated that system theory thinking was needed more than ever because of the overwhelming complexity of our time. He identified two forms of complexity, detailed complexity and dynamic complexity. Detailed complexity relates to the number of variables in a situation, while dynamic complexity refers to the complexity of the interrelationships and patterns between the variables.

McMahon, Watson and Patton (2014) claim that the systemic theoretical approach is a reaction to the longstanding hegemonic position of the logical positivistic worldview in career development theories. Further, they argue that the underpinnings of systems theory correlate with constructivism and that both 'represent an epistemological position that emphasizes self-organizing and proactive knowing. Both perspectives assert that individuals actively construct their own reality, and are able to actively construct a meaningful position within the work context.' At the same time, Patton and McMahon (2014: 24) propose that some of the benefits of a systemic approach are that it allows that 'the important contributions of all career theories can be recognized, and similarities, differences, and interconnections between theories can be demonstrated.' In my opinion, the argument seems contradictory. How can a theory contribute to recognition of all career theories, while simultaneously advocate for one epistemological view? Here critical realism (CR) provide us with a nuancing approach. The origin of CR is to be found in a criticism of several dichotomous relations in science (e.g. between constructivism/positivism) (Danermark, Ekstrøm, Jakobsen and Karlsson, 2003). The goal was to create a more holistic approach to science, including building bridges between apparently conflicting ontological and epistemological viewpoints of reality and knowledge creation. Although not labeled as CR, I find similar arguments in the integrative approach proposed by

Chen (2003). Chen (2003:213) proposes 'a flexible and eclectic relationship between theories, in general, and between the two major schools of thinking – positivism and constructivism – in particular'. Archer et.al (1998: xi), although not explicitly labeling it a systemic theory, sum up the fundamental traits pointing to critical realism as an alternative epistemological and ontological approach to systemic thinking with the following words: 'critical realism claims to be able to combine and reconcile ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationality'. The first part of this statement implies that there exists a reality which is stratified, differentiated, structured and changing. The second part tells us that our knowledge about this reality is always fallible but, as the last characteristic suggests, there are some theoretical and methodological tools we can use in order to discriminate among theories regarding their ability to inform us about the external reality. One recommended way of performing this kind of judgemental rationality is through a critical realistic grounded theory approach (Kempster and Parry, 2014).

Research methodology

According to Patton and McMahon (2014: 170), 'The past two decades have been marked by a considerable expansion of research on career development in childhood and adolescence.' In spite of the positive development, contributors to Skorikov and Patton (2007), Hooley (2014), and Watson and McMahon (2005) acknowledged limitations in existing empirical knowledge. Based on an updated review of research findings, Patton and McMahon (2014) concludes that a much deeper understanding of factors and mechanism need to be developed. Critical realism claims that scientific work is to 'investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world.' (Bhaskar 1978: 56). To gain this kind of rich insight, Kempster and Parry (2014: 88) advocates a grounded theory approach guided by a critical realistic frame. Key elements of this approach is 'First, clarifying the subject matter in relation to CR ontological assumptions. Second, data collection emphasizing exploring lived experience through

interviews. Third, analyzing data based on abduction and retroduction. Retroduction implies a commitment to theoretical pluralism, at least at the outset of an investigation. Multiple theoretical lenses can be considered for what they tell us about the various and stratefied influences that are affecting the things we observe.'

In my project, three of the articles are used to clarify the subject matter (Haug and Plant, 2015; Haug, 2016a and Haug and Plant, 2016). The fourth article (Haug, 2016b) presents the results from focus group interviews with pupils, practitioners and school leaders from secondary and upper secondary schools in a Norwegian county, focusing on their representations of good career guidance.

Discussion

Now, I will return to the initial research questions in the discussion section of this article. My initial conclusion from the 'clarifying of the concept' was an impression of an extensive diversity in representations of good career guidance, especially in the understandings of the preferable goal for guidance. A comprehensive presentation and discussion of the correspondence between the representations, its underlying assumptions, and produced effect (organizational and procedural solutions), are available in the articles (Haug and Plant, 2015; Haug, 2016a; Haug, 2016b and Haug and Plant, 2016) and in the final PhD thesis (Haug 2016c). In this discussion, I will focus on what I propose as the most essential issue from the research, as an example of the potential of the critical realistic integrative approach to the subject of interest.

Focus on the next career choice or lifelong preparation?

In both theoretical representations and especially political steering documents and recommendations, an emphasis is put on the importance of preparation for future societal participation (Patton and McMahon, 2014; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016; ELGPN, 2015; OECD, 2004b; Thomsen, 2014). The implications for practice is a recommendation for a stronger emphasis on developing lifelong lasting career management skills

(CMS) through different career learning activities (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, and Neary, 2013; Thomsen 2014). Although emphasizing guidance as potentially both a private and public good, Plant and Kjærgård (2016: 16) advocates that an important underlying assumption to the interest in CMS is to be found in societal changes of the 21st century described as 'neoliberal with focus on global competitiveness and increased individual autonomy'. They continue that consequently, this lead to: 'political discourses include the idea that every citizen should pursue a career and that career guidance should serve the knowledge economy and seek to increase individual's human capital and capacity to compete'.

Given this description of policy representations of the preferred goal, I find it interesting that a defining theme emerging from all three participant representations in the focus group interviews (Haug, 2016b) sees good guidance as fulfilled when focusing on the next career choice (e.g. from secondary to upper secondary). Going into potential explanations, Brown (2002) relates this to underlying 'career views'. She distinguish between a process view and an 'event' view of the concept of career, putting the prior in connection to developmental approaches (e.g. Super, 1990), and the latter in connection with trait factor and person environment fit approaches (e.g. Dawis, 2002). A more sociological explanation is provided by Gørlich and Katznelson (2015). They advocates that the focus on career management skills can be seen as underpinned by an increased individualization. The pupils might experience that the freedom, but also responsibility for long term future planning seems overwhelming. As a methodological 'answer' to these experiences, different approaches (e.g. Gelatt, 1989) are developed. However, these approaches were not considered important in the interviews (Haug, 2016b). On the contrary, they were featured as abstract and unsuitable.

Plant (2012) advocates that this apparently discrepancy between proposed theoretical and methodological approaches, policy intentions on the one hand, and representations from the users and providers of guidance on the other hand, can be seen as expressions of different answers to questions like 'Who owns guidance?' and 'Who is it for?' He suggests that 'In relation to policy makers, who demand

evidence, questions arise such as: why should societies invest in guidance? What is the impact? For guidance practitioners, focal points are: how can we deliver good quality, and how can quality assurance systems in fact help to improve the services, rather than just being another bureaucratic exercise? The users of guidance, on the other hand want the best help they can get, when they need it, in a form that they can accept and understand (p. 92).

The silenced voice of users?

The fourth research question in this project is concerned with what problems, or approaches are least apparent in the ongoing dialogue on good career guidance. A recurrent issue in this project is the lack of user voices, both as co-researchers and as co-creators of the service provision (Haug and Plant 2016). There is a strong consensus that user involvement is important in both quality development and quality assurance in guidance (ELGPN, 2010; OECD, 2004b). Nevertheless, Plant (2012) argued that despite good intentions, the users are seldom given a voice in these matters. A promising initiative in this concern, is a newly released book: De frafalne ['the dropped out'] (Reegård and Rogstad, 2016). This publication concentrates on theorizing 'drop out' and 'early school leaving' issues based on comprehensive interviews with adolescents. This approach is a main recommendation in the PhD thesis, with its focus on going from the descriptions of what the problem is represented to be, to as it is viewed from the adolescents.

Conclusion

Hughes (2013) advocates a clear vision for future career guidance in schools. In the project, I have advocated that this clearness should encompass an open and reflective approach to career planning for adolescents as a multifaceted issue, with several representations and 'correct answers' with different underlying assumptions in play. When evaluating the quality of the various activities in guidance, it is important to note that measurements are 'marked by political, ideological and value-related ideas, which makes what is considered to be quality for some

not necessarily means the same for others' (NOU, 2003: 64). Supporters of a given quality perspective tend to regard their own point of view of course as self-evident (Dahler-Larsen, 2008). This in turn causes a mismatch in the communication about good quality. Further herein lies a potential for some understandings to be considered as the normative and correct ones, while other understandings are virtually absent in the debate on the phenomenon. Therefore, my proposed future direction for career guidance services in Norwegian schools corresponds with Savickas (2011: 8) saying, 'So today, depending upon a client's needs, practitioners may apply different career services […] Each career intervention […] is valuable and effective for its intended purpose.'

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Thesis title:

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