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Agency in competency-based guidance counsellor education in two Finnish universities of applied sciences

Tiina Laajala¹, Pirjo-Liisa Lehtelä¹, Outi Rantanen², Ari Jussila²

¹*Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Finland* ; ²*Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland*

Abstract

Competency-based model of learning in vocational education was implemented throughout Finland in 2017–2018 to strengthen the relationship between education and the fast-changing world of work and to meet better the needs of the current society. In competency-based education individual study paths make it possible for the students to recognize the skills previously acquired and outline what kind of skills need to be developed.

The emphasis on agency has increased in career counselling theories of postmodern society. The present interpretation of career emphasizes life design. The current concept of agency is linkable to the central goals of competency-based education which are: supporting and strengthening students' role as autonomous learners and offering them opportunities to plan personal study paths.

In this qualitative study we investigated how the counsellor students (N=50) expect the competency-based guidance counsellor education to support their agency in their career development process. The students reflected their autonomy, their development in guidance counsellor's competencies and their construction of guidance counsellor's identity in competency-based education. From the material emerged that the students are diverse in terms of agency and the ability to take full responsibility of their study path. Our study reveals that different forms of agency are present in the context of competency-based guidance counsellor education. It is important that educators in competency-based education support the students' agency in their career and life-design processes.

Keywords: Agency, life-design, competency-based education, guidance counsellor education

Introduction

The world of work has turned into something that is complex and uncertain. Today, career paths are fragmented and at the same time precarious work has increased. As working and educational periods rotate in an individual's life, the career management skills are needed more than ever. (Savickas et al. 2009.)

Finishing the studies and graduating have been clear goals to the students. Accordingly, supporting the students in completing their studies has been one of guidance counsellor's main tasks. The idea of lifelong education, as well as career theories, have brought out the idea that learning, personal and professional development continue after completing one's formal studies.

Guidance counsellors are meaningful supporters and fellow travelers on the students' career paths. In societal level, the effectiveness of counselling appears as strengthened decision-making processes, fluent transitions and successful educational and career choices. In Finland, guidance counsellors work inside the schools and educational organizations and have a teacher's background, which is advantageous in co-operating with the school staff (Sweet, Nissinen & Vuorinen, 2014).

Finland is moving towards competency-based education on all educational levels. Especially the Finnish vocational education has undergone large changes during the last few years. Competency-based model of learning was implemented throughout the country in 2017–2018 to strengthen the relationship between education and the fast-changing world of work and to meet the needs of the current society better. On all educational levels recognizing one's personal strengths and the ability to assess competencies acquired formally, informally or non-formally, have become central skills. The individual competency development and career plan form the foundation for students to pursue their studies and career paths.

As the foundations of pedagogical thinking and practices evolve continuously, it is essential to educate guidance counsellors to support learners in their self-assessment and personal study plan processes. Guidance counsellor education in Finnish universities of applied sciences is a 60 ECTS's further education programme for qualified teachers who plan to become guidance counsellors or want to strengthen their counselling skills. Guidance counsellor education in Tampere and Oulu University of Applied sciences is implemented as competency-based, hence the counsellor students acquire a personal experience of competency-based learning process.

Self-assessment is a process where students reflect the influences and meanings of their past actions in various fields of life. It is a form of reconstruction process (Karjalainen, Korento, Pousi, Virkkula & Kuortti 2018) in which students dismantle and put their career histories into words in terms of their future career plans. The time aspect is present in the self-assessment process: students work out their future at this very moment from the ingredients of their past. It is the student who is driving this process as the principal agent.

In this paper we present an overview of competency-based guidance counsellor education in two Finnish universities of applied sciences and agency in career development process. Then we concentrate on describing our qualitative study where we surveyed the counsellor students' experiences how competency-based guidance counsellor education supports their agency.

Competency-based guidance counsellor education

Moving towards competency-based education on all educational levels has been a joint key reformation programme in EU member countries during last decades. Competency-based education has its pragmatic advantages. However, it has faced also a lot of critique being accused for maintaining behaviorism and

establishing the neo-liberal model of schooling (Autio 2016; Petkutė 2019, 379; Wheelahan 2015). Being completely aware of the current critique, we want to highlight the metacognitive and reflective aspects of the self-assessment process which forms the basis of the competency-based learning process (see also Laajala 2019).

The cornerstones of competency-based guidance counsellor education are personalization, guidance and the counselling process. Personalization of studies can take many forms, including accreditation of prior learning and “studification of work”. Studification of work is a new, alternative way to study at universities of applied sciences. It is a model of studying where learning is brought from the classroom to the workplace and formal studies are combined with work. (Kukkonen 2016.)

Personalization includes tailoring of content and action to the individual student’s frame of reference and it enables students to plan personal learning paths that encourage them to set and manage their individual goals. This does not mean that individual students are separated from each other. Teamwork and studying together have an essential role during the whole learning process and it is strongly nourished by teachers within the studies. The main idea of personalization is that it strengthens the student’s engagement by increasing psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks 2003, 86). Psychological ownership is a cognitive-affective state in which students feel a sense of ownership in the process of studying.

Successful guidance and counselling process requires mutual respect, listening, encouragement, dialogue and emotional sensitivity. Teachers, other staff members and representatives of the world of work can encourage students’ engagement in their learning and performance improvement by guiding students in planning their own learning and studying. Personal meaning-making is emphasized in constructing positive future scenarios within the counselling process. The goal of guidance and counselling is to help the students become aware of themselves and their own potential within a dialogical environment and participatory culture. (Kukkonen 2016.) Guidance and counselling help to regulate the development of competencies and support the learner’s ability to apply skills, knowledge and experience to new situations and processes (Michael 2008).

Agency

The emphasis of agency has increased in career counselling theories of postmodern society. The present interpretation of career emphasizes contextual chances in life design, dynamic processes, non-linear progress, manifold perspectives of realities and personal mode of actions. (Vanhalakka-Ruoho 2015.)

Intentionality, narrativity, active engagement and transformability are central features of agency. The basic question of life design is how individuals construct their careers and place work as a part of the life in the present society. Life design theory stresses that by acting in various life fields individuals identify activities that tune their identities. (Guichard et al. 2012; Savickas et al. 2009; Vanhalakka-Ruoho 2015, 48.)

The current concept of agency is linkable to the central goals of competency-based education which are: supporting and strengthening the students’ role as

autonomous learners and offering them opportunities to plan personal study paths. Teachers and educational counsellors are in a facilitator's role (Virkkula et al. 2018). Competency-based education can be regarded as a phase of life through which students piecemeal design their careers (compare to Guichard et al. 2012; Vanhalakka-Ruoho 2015, 48.)

Bandura (1989; 2001; 2006) analyses agency as cognitive, self-regulative and reflective process. He defines (1989, 1175; 2002) agency developing as an interactive culturally engaged process which, however, differs firstly from the completely individually determined agency and secondly from the agency mechanically and directly derived from the social environment. Bandura (2001) outlines three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency and collective agency. Proxy agency relies on others in acting and in other persons' resources and knowledge. Collective agency is constructed in a group through shared and collective act.

Four components of agency are distinguished (Bandura 2006, 164–165): intentionality, proactive thinking, self-reactivity, i.e. ability to orientate and get motivated, and finally self-reflectivity. The most central mechanisms in Bandura's thinking are the individuals' beliefs of their abilities and possibilities to influence to the events that control the conditions of acting. Individuals' actions effect to themselves and environment and are linked both to personal factors and to environment. The process is called three-pronged determination. Self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1989, 1175-1179) work as cognitive, motivational and affection involved influences. These self-efficacy beliefs include patterns of thinking which can either promote or inhibit individuals' action.

The goal of our study is to clarify through counsellor students' experiences how competency-based guidance counsellor education supports their agency in their career development process. By career development process we refer to present career theories and their concept of agency where the educational process is regarded as one phase of individuals' life design process.

Method

This is a qualitative study where we investigated how the counsellor students expect competency-based guidance counsellor education to support their agency in their career development process. Our material consists of the responses collected from the final feedback inquiry aimed at guidance counsellor students of Oulu and Tampere Universities of applied sciences. The inquiries were carried out during 2016-2018. The number of the respondents is 50. The average age of the respondents is about forty.

Thematic analysis was applied for the analysing of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 103). After reading the material rigorously, we aggregated the absorbing themes related to our interest to investigate the students' experiences of competency-based guidance counsellor education. The analysis of this study follows the logic of inductive grounded theory analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 91). Next, we will illustrate our findings through some examples. The name of a city in parentheses after the quotations refers either to students of Oulu or Tampere university of applied sciences.

Findings

Autonomy and intentionality in learning process

The guidance counsellor students brought out the significance of autonomy in their competency-based learning process. Some of the students highlighted the importance of the possibility to plan their own progress in studies and to plan individual ways to demonstrate their competencies. Their answers illustrate that a non-linearly progressing study programme responds to their needs to develop their competencies as autonomous learners. In this cyclic learning process students need to reflect retroactively on their competency development, and they are expected to take full responsibility for their learning process. Bandura (2006, 164–165) underlines that fostering intentionality is an essential component of agency and a goal of life designing.

-Studies have been student-centred. I like that I can outline my own needs to develop competencies. At the same time I can reflect my prior competencies that I already have. (Tampere)

-Competency-based education is proper for me :) It has been wonderful to study at your own pace. Some of the cognitive competence goals were acknowledged on the grounds of my previous studies which helped me to speed up my study time. If I lost the common thread during the studies, the discussions with teachers helped me to reflect my goals once again. Joy to discover and learn :) (Oulu)

-Competency-based education suits me well. I'm not a very theoretical person or gifted in writing. It is great that you can demonstrate your competency in many different ways and it is acknowledged in various ways. (Oulu)

On the other hand, some of the guidance counsellor students experienced the competency-based education model demanding. They would have liked the teachers to give them prepared assignments. It is not easy to take responsibility for the progress of your whole studies while your former learning experiences are from teacher-directed education. Bandura notes (2012) that the ability to re-orientate in new situations and get motivated is one component of agency.

-Competency-based education demands a change of the way of thinking...On the other hand, I wish that sometimes I'd been given some ready structured assignments. (Oulu)

-First I was horrified about the messy curriculum. Taking full responsibility of own studies and team forming with other students were challenging for me, but once you take control over them, they are just the things to push you forward in your development process. (Tampere)

Reflection

Reflection has a central role in competency-based education. It is not possible to acknowledge guidance counsellors' competency by observing their counselling actions, there must always be metacognitive reflection on action. Professional development of guidance counsellor demands dialogic and reflective competency and the demonstration of the competencies is mostly done by reflecting on one's

own action and thinking. Bandura (2006, 164–165) stresses self-reflection as one of the essential components of the agency.

- My belief on my self-efficacy has strengthened through reflection. (Tampere)*
- Students really have to reflect on things! (Oulu)*

Constructing the guidance counsellor's identity

Based on their answers the students had gained reassurance to their competencies. The ability to reflect one's professional development objectively and realistically emerges from the answers. Identity construction is closely linked to life-design (Guichard 2012). Constructing an identity of a guidance counsellor does not necessarily happen fast and the students may engage long to the former identity of a teacher. To strengthen the identity of the guidance counsellor requires time and social environment which nourishes and reinforces the building the new identity. According to the answers the construction of guidance counsellor's identity demands above all ability to reflect one's own identity construction.

- During the studies ... I met many guidance counsellors and saw their professional (way to work) and got affirmation to my own way to counsel and construct my identity of guidance counsellor. (Oulu)*
- I have reflected much my guidance counsellor identity and have now taken a stronger role as a guidance counsellor. I have moved a little by little from a study guidance coordinator to a guidance counsellor. (Tampere)*
- Developing guidance counsellor's competencies and guidance counsellor's identity has been a long path and I'm still on the road. However, I have begun to see my work through counsellor's "lenses" as I earlier identified myself as a distributor of facts. (Oulu)*

Supporting the counsellor students' agency

In competency-based education the teacher's role is to facilitate students' development process (Virkkula et al. 2018). Agency is shaped in culturally engaged interaction (Bandura 1989, 1175, 2002). The guidance counsellor students brought out that feedback from their teachers has supported their agency. The feedback given to students is both oral and written and it is given by two teachers' team. The feedback focuses on student's knowledge of theoretical comprehension and counselling skills.

- Personal counselling conversations (were meaningful for my development). (Tampere)*
- Especially counselling conversations have carried me during the studies. I've got feedback, encouragement and motivation, thanks for that! Those gave also clear advice to things I was searching and I could supplement my competencies. (Oulu)*

Proxy agency (Bandura 2001) relies on others' help and resources. We suggest that proxy agency (Bandura 2001) was realized in some cases when the students experienced the support of a colleague in their working settings the most important in terms of their professional development and reaching their goals.

-Getting a mentor was a good thing, we found the same frequency at once. (Tampere)

Competency-based education is committed to offering personal study paths, but additionally firm small groups function as significant learning environment. Moreover, the whole study group form a focal peer network for the students. For some of the students the meaning of the peer group was very vital, and they participated actively to the contact teaching days. For them the collective agency (Bandura 2001) was meaningful and they seemed to have a common goal and shared motivation. The students brought out in their answers that sharing knowledge strengthened their agency.

-Sharing knowledge by reflecting together with other students. (Oulu)

-The discussions with other students and with my own small group have been most important for me. (Tampere)

Discussion

Competency-based model appears to be applicable in guidance counsellor education. This kind of practice to study and acquire competencies can cause puzzlement, especially in the beginning of the studies. Sometimes the historic load may be heavy and learning away from the teacher-centered model of learning can even be painful. However, the personal experience of going through the challenging initial phase enforces the counsellor students' competencies to encounter and counsel their own students in competency-based education.

We investigated how counsellor students presume competency-based guidance counsellor education supports their agency in their career development process. The students reflected autonomy, development of competencies and the construction of their guidance counsellor' identity in competency-based education. Autonomy in studies yields enthusiasm, but also anxiety. Students are different in terms of agency and in their ability to take full responsibility of their study path. In competency-based education, self-reflection is interwoven to the ability to reflect competencies and identity construction. In the learning process there should be time and space for the students to reflect on their identity. Guidance counsellor educators must listen with sensitivity how the competency-based learning process starts from the viewpoint of agency. Naturally, educational counselling must be offered to the students.

Our study reveals that different forms of agency are present in the context of competency-based guidance counsellor education. This means that the educators must dare give up the responsibility of studies to the students themselves. Some students are competent to take up the responsibility better than the others. It is the teacher's role to follow up and offer support when it is needed. The educators in competency-based education must pay attention on the point that students need various kind of counselling to support their career and life-design processes.

There are, however, a few limitations associated with the research. The size of the overall sample was relatively small, though data gained was in-depth and relevant to the goal of the study. Interviews might give even more deepened knowledge in the future. The next step will be to carry out the study with a large number of participants and utilize interviews as a part of the research material. Nonetheless, our findings provide meaningful knowledge of the counsellor

students' experiences on how competency-based guidance counsellor education supports their agency.

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