



Professionalizing teachers in career dialogue: an effect study

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Abstract

As a result of the changing notions of work schools are increasingly acknowledging that they have a strong responsibility to guide students not only in their academic growth, but also in their career development. This paper presents the result of a study about effects of teachers training on career dialogue promoting career competency development in students. For the quantitative part of the study, a quasi experimental research design is used to measure effects among 2500 students. Video-recordings of conversations are used for qualitative research. The results show only when the off-the-job training is followed by on-the-job coaching, the professionalizing proves to be effective on student level: students notice that the guidance conversations are more appreciative, reflective and activating and are about self image development, work and career actions. Also the observation on guidance conversations show that the conversations are more career related

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1. Introduction

Since the 1980s the range of possible occupational and educational choices has increased dramatically in Western societies (OECD, 2004). As a result, individuals are faced with a growing pressure to make choices, while at the same time due to flexibilisation of employment relationships (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005) and individualisation within society (Beck, 1994) less and less direction is provided. The individual is expected to demonstrate more self-directedness on the labour market (Savickas et al, 2010). Schools are increasingly acknowledging that they have a strong responsibility to guide students not only in their academic growth, but also in their career development (Gysbers and Henderson, 2005; Jarvis and Keeley, 2003). Therefore, schools for vocational education in the European Union invest increasingly in career guidance (Company, 2009).

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Research shows that the focus on careers education and guidance in schools is mainly focused on helping students with their academic achievement and not on helping students to plan and prepare for their work roles afterwards (Parsad, et al., 2003). Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy (2011) show that a strong career learning environment (i.e. an environment that enables students to develop and to use career competencies) allows for experiential learning in combination with a dialogue about what can be learned from the concrete experiences which are aimed at the (development of) a vocational calling and in relation to that a career. A career –dialogue is needed to (re)formulate dreams and goals regarding a career (Pizzolato, 2007) and to create ‘vocational hope’: the feeling that a career is possible (Diemer & Blustein, 2007).

It proves to be extremely difficult, however, to achieve a career dialogue in schools; schools rarely offer room for students’ narratives to be developed or expressed (Winters et al., 2009, 2011, 2012). Educational culture is monological and focused on control by means of tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007) – as a result most teachers are very uncertain about their abilities to help students in developing a career narrative which is a result of a career dialogue. Therefore, teachers explicitly ask to be trained in initiating a career dialogue with their students (Sangers, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that teachers feel uncertain in this area because the effectiveness of a dialogical career approach largely depends – as in all forms of counselling (Wampold, 2001; Cooper, 2008) – on the trust the counsellor has in the chosen approach.

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge on the effects of training for teachers with regard to career dialogues. The research question is: *What is the effect of the training on the form and the content of the career dialogue between teacher and student?*

2. Design

A total of 230 teachers from twenty schools for primary vocational education in the Netherlands participated in the training on career conversations and in the research connected to the training. A little bit more than half of the research group (59%) is female; one third has less than four years, one third four to ten years, and one third has more than ten years of working experience. Most teachers teach third year students, a third teaches fourth year students and only 10% teaches second year students.

The research has a quantitative and a qualitative component. Before and after the training questionnaires were administered to students in an experimental (students of 191 teachers, who participated in the training) and a control group (students of colleague-teachers, who did not participate). The questionnaires were completed by 2291 students before and after the training. The group of students was equally divided among gender lines and the average age was 15 with 20% being from the immigrant population. The students were mainly in the third and fourth year and came from all four sectors in primary vocational education (i.e. health care, economics, technics, agriculture and the so-called multi-sectorial education).

For the qualitative part of the study, teachers participated in the training made video recordings of their career conversations with students before and after the training. Thirty two of these recordings are used for the qualitative research.

The training consisted of an off-the-job and an on-the-job part. In the off-the-job part the emphasis is on theory and on exercising career conversations in a safe environment. In the on-the-job part the emphasis is on the transfer to school practice. To measure the effect of training, there are two variants of the experimental/control group:

1. Students of the teachers' group that participated in the two-day off-the-job training with a control group of teachers who had no training at all.
2. students of teachers who participated in the full training process consisting of the off-the-job as well at least two individual coachings sessions and two team coaching sessions on-the-job, and a control group of teachers who had no (full) training program.

2.1. Instruments

The self-evaluation based questionnaire used for collecting data from the students is an adaptation of the questionnaire used by Kuijpers & Meijers (2011). The questionnaire measures two aspects regarding the form and two aspects regarding the content of the dialogue. The form aspects consists of (1) the appreciative form of the career dialogue (5 items; Cronbachs' alpha pre-test .79 and post-test .86), and (2) the reflective/activating form of the dialogue (7 items; alpha .83 and .86). Example items for the appreciative form include: "my teacher gives me compliments". Example items for the reflective-active form: "My teacher makes me think about my future" and "My teacher encourages me to learn new things that I find challenging". The content aspects of the conversations that were measured, are (1) self images (6 items; alpha .86 and .89), and (2) work and concrete actions regarding career (6 items; alpha .87 and .87). An example item for self image is: "I talk with my teacher about my talents". Example items for concrete actions regarding work and career are: "I talk with my teacher about pro's and con's of certain jobs" and "I talk with my teacher about how I can use my activities outside school for my future". Gender, ethnicity, study year, study level and sector are included as control variables.

Due to the hierarchical nature of the data (students within classes within schools), multi-level regression analysis was conducted, using the MLWIN v.2.0 program (Rasbash et al. 2005). All continuous variables were normalized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1.0. All hypotheses were tested two-sided and p-values less than 0.05 were considered to be significant, unless indicated otherwise.

For the qualitative analyses of the recorded conversations we used the instrument developed by Winters et al. (2009, 2012). This instrument was tested on usefulness and reliability through analysing three conversations by two independently operating researchers. As a result, the instrument was slightly adjusted.

3. Results

The training proves to be effective when the full professionalizing program, off-the-job and on-the-job, is completed. Table 1 shows that, when we compare the training group to the control group, participating in the full training program contributes to the scores of the outcome variables (post-test scores on form and content of guidance conversation), when we take the scores of the pre-test into account, and control for the personal and situational factors. This means that students of teachers, who participated in the full training program, find that their guidance conversation has become more career related over time than students of teachers who did not have the (full) training. Students of teachers, who participated in the training, experience their guidance conversation as more appreciative, reflective and activating since the pre-test than the students in the control group. Moreover, they talk more about their self image, work and career actions.

Table 1. Results of multilevel regression analyses with career conversations as dependent variable in the post-test

	Appreciative	Reflective-activating	About self image	About work and career actions
Score in pre-test	.383 (.019)*	.364 (.020)*	.409 (.019)*	.355 (.020)*
Personal and situational factors				
Male (0/1)	-.006 (.020)	.006 (.020)	.051 (.020)	.063 (.021)*
Immigrant (0/1)	-.035 (.020)	-.023 (.020)	-.034 (.020)	-.025 (.021)
Study year	-.017 (.035)	-.019 (.036)	-.004 (.031)	.011 (.035)
Study level	.043 (.036)	-.007 (.036)	-.049 (.032)	-.057 (.035)
Sector: Health care	.180 (.103)	.214 (.108)	.156 (.093)	.103 (.106)
Economics	.143 (.092)	.122 (.097)	.011 (.082)	.117 (.095)
Technics	-.013 (.122)	.114 (.125)	-.007 (.110)	.052 (.123)
Agriculture	-.010 (.140)	-.001 (.150)	.019 (.122)	-.077 (.146)
Multi sector	.137 (.128)	.072 (.132)	-.050 (.111)	-.010 (.128)
Full training program (0/1)	.083 (.032)*	.098 (.035)*	.073 (.028)*	.071 (.034)*
School variance	.000 (.000)	.007 (.009)	.000 (.000)	.008 (.008)
Group variance	.115 (.019)*	.114 (.020)*	.070 (.014)*	.099 (.018)*
Rest variance	.690 (.022)*	.709 (.022)*	.719 (.023)*	.736 (.023)*
Improvement of the model by adding the full training program to personal and situational factors	6,4 (df 1)*	7,8 (df 1)*	6,7 (df 1)*	4,5 (df 1)*
N	2211	2211	2211	2211

* p<.05

When we conduct the analysis with the off-the-job training program as the experimental condition instead of the full training program, we find no significant effects on the development of form and content of career conversations measured at student level (not shown in table).

In the qualitative study we see that conversations after training take more time, compared to the conversations before training. The main reason for this is that teacher and student talk more fully about the career of the students. Besides this, the development of the self image of students is more often taken into account. Even work and career actions are subjects of conversation, whereas in the pre-test conversations these subjects were hardly addressed.

As to the form of conversation, we see that students have more input into the conversation than before. Unlike in the pre-test, in the post-test conversation the goal and content of the conversation is determined prior to the conversation (i.e. a clear contact and contract). As in the pre-test conversation, teachers have an active listening attitude and validate students' input. More often than in the pre-test conversation, appreciative remarks are made by the teachers. Students are also more challenged in thinking further and deeper about their careers and orienting themselves. Students are rarely challenged to practice what they want to learn or to prove what they are already able to do. Furthermore, students are rarely challenged to formulate their thoughts; often the teacher fills in for the student.

After the training, the topics discussed in the guidance conversations are more often career related. Not only the number of topics but also the perspective of these topics changed. When it is about the

student's course of study, the conversation is more focused on the attitude of students and less on their marks and problems. There is more talking about their private lives and their extracurricular experiences and the experiences students have that are related to their career. Reflection on qualities and motives are addressed on a higher abstraction level. Such conversations provide input for self-image development and self-confidence. More often than in the pre-test conversation, teachers talk with the students about work and about the actions students can undertake to realise their vocational wishes. Also these subject are more often addressed in relation to the student's future. Networking was no subject of discussion in the pre-test conversation. However, in almost all post-test conversations networking was introduced. Networking is more about who students know, not about how to approach people or how they can expand and maintain their network.

4. Discussion

An important conclusion of this study is that a two day off-the-job training for teachers seems insufficient to achieve significant changes in guidance conversations, measured on a student level. However, this off-the-job training combined with individual coaching and team coaching on-the-job, proves to be effective in improving the guidance conversation from a student perspective. It requires guided processing of the off-the-job training in the teacher's own practice. Not only the quantitative study shows changes in guidance conversations after the training program, changes are also visible in conversation recordings; in other words teachers achieve more career-oriented questions and students achieve more career-oriented answers.

Although the training proves to be effective, it is not easy to motivate teachers to participate in training. A need for professionalization is not self-evident to teachers (Van Driel, 2008). Teachers prefer short off-the-job training courses to learn how to work with specific instruments. However, the offered training is not only more time consuming (a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job), it focuses on changes in one's professional identity. The development of personality traits and qualities only takes place when those learning find the content meaningful (and that is something quite different than content being considered 'necessary'). Moreover, it requires implementation of learning activities in the career of the teachers (Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006). The kind of dialogue that is needed here is described by Shotter (1993, p.20) as "a socially constructed myriad of spontaneous, responsive, practical, unselfconscious, but contested interactions", a form that is directly opposed to "the apparent representation of dialogue as converging upon a single ultimate 'Truth'". The togetherness that lies at the heart of collective learning is therefore not based on pre-established truths, but a rich, shared meaning created and based on the ideas of all those involved (Easterby-Smith, Crossan & Nicolini, 2000). In order to achieve such a learning environment within the dominant educational culture, transformative leadership is essential (Geijsel, Meijers & Wardekker, 2007). Such leadership, however, is rare in Dutch education. Further research could focus specifically on the contribution of collective learning and transformative leadership on career learning of teachers and career guidance by teachers.

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