

A dialogue worth having: vocational competence, career identity and a learning environment for 21st century success at work

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Abstract

The cultivation of intrinsic motivation is key in the 21st century, but most students in Dutch vocational education lack this quality. To foster intrinsic motivation, a strong career-learning environment is needed that enables students to develop career competencies and a career identity. However such an environment is absent in much of vocational education in The Netherlands. Research shows that the desired learning must be practice based (real life experiences are key), enable a dialogue (in order to attach personal meaning to real life experiences) and give students more autonomy in making choices in their school careers. Although there has been an increase in the use of portfolios and personal-development plans, these instruments are used mainly for improving success at school but are not in career and work. In addition research on the conversations between student and teachers/work-place mentors shows that the latter talk primarily *to* (65%), and *about* (21%), but rarely *with* (9%) students. The culture in schools is still predominately monological. Most teachers feel uncertain about their abilities to help students in developing career competencies and a career identity, though a growing number of teachers want to be trained in initiating meaningful career dialogues. In order to make such training successful in terms of promoting new guidance behaviours, it is essential that school managers create a strong career-learning environment for teachers. The *Standards Era* policies (Gatto, 2009) that dominate Dutch vocational education at the moment, however, leaves managers little space to do so.

Key words

21st century skills, career competencies, career identity, career-learning environment, career learning, career dialogue, vocational education

Introduction

In post-industrial societies, employers are looking for graduates with so-called 21st century skills, while previously the emphasis was on technical skills (Cedefop, 2010; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Leckey & McGuigan, 1997). The Dutch government has enthusiastically recognized the demand for these new skills (Bussemaker, 2014), embracing the idea of their development (Allen & Van der Velden, 2011) but without realizing that such skills require a different learning environment than when the aim is to train students to be technically competent (Payne, 2000; Smith & Comyn, 2004). The underlying dimension of 21st century skills, especially in the service and knowledge economy, is intrinsic motivation (Schulz, 2008). Indeed, the core of employability is the ability to show flexibility based on commitment to work and to the employer in changing times (Hillage, Regan, Dickson & McLoughlin, 2002; Lafer, 2004).

That said, there are serious doubts about the intrinsic motivation of students and the level of knowledge and skills they can acquire within the existing Dutch vocational education system

(Biemans et al, 2004; Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2014). An important reason for this situation seems to be the fact that most students fail to develop a clear career wish, let alone a career or vocational identity, during their time at school (Geurts & Meijers, 2009). Studies indicate that most students in vocational education are not intrinsically motivated to do their school work (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2014) nor do the majority of them know what they want to do career wise (Meijers, Kuijpers & Bakker, 2006). The latter fact leads to rather random educational choices (Plane, 2009) and subsequent dropout rates of between 30 to 50% (Eurostat, 2008). A Dutch study (Borghans et al., 2008) estimated that the societal costs of students taking longer to complete their studies as a result of unsuitable choices was 5,7 billion euros a year.

In this chapter, we argue that the learning environment required to foster intrinsic motivation must be aimed at the development of particular career competencies (Kuijpers, 2003) and a career identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Research done by the authors in Dutch vocational education also shows that career competencies and a career identity can be successfully developed if students are given more room to make their own choices regarding their education and if they have work experiences about which they can have meaningful career conversations (Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy, 2011; Meijers, Kuijpers & Gundy, 2013).

In recent years, Dutch schools for vocational education have increasingly invested in career guidance to address the issues described above. They are helped in this by the Dutch Department of Education, which started a project within pre-vocational education in 2010 (Kuijpers, 2011; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2011) to stimulate effective career guidance. In 2012 they also started a 3-year project within secondary vocational education. The latter was referred to as the 'Stimuleringsproject Loopbaanoriëntatie en -begeleiding in het mbo' (Promotion of vocational guidance in secondary vocational education). In this ongoing project, particular attention is paid to policy development with regards to career education in schools and to the training of teachers so that they learn to have meaningful career conversations with students. That said, most school managers still have little or no vision regarding career guidance and counselling; they simply invest in doing more of the same (i.e. repeating the same well-established but ineffective guidance activities) (Meijers, 2008; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2013). In part, this lack of a clear vision among managers is the result of the lack of consensus about what constitutes effective career guidance in an educational context, not only internationally (Law, 2005; OECD, 2004) but also nationally (Hughes, Meijers & Kuijpers, 2014).

1. Career learning: a short history

In The Netherlands (Meijers, 1995) as well as in other Western nations (European Commission & OECD, 2004; Sultana, 2004; Irving & Malik, 2005; Watts & Sultana, 2004) career guidance in education is primarily based on the trait-and-factor model. In this approach, which has had a huge influence on the shape and content of career guidance and counselling in education – especially through the work of Holland (1973, 1985) – the concepts 'informed choice' and 'decision making' are key. The idea here is that a good career choice is made when the personality and the talents of a potential employee match with the required

knowledge and skills of a particular job. Following this line of reasoning, counsellors and teachers are expected and encouraged to provide students with reliable information about their talents and with information about the knowledge and skills that are needed to carry out particular jobs. Finally, it is assumed that students can and will make rational career choices as a result.

Until the late sixties, independent guidance offices provided the services described above and children from families with higher socio-economic status tended to benefit most (Pere, 1986). However with the increased meritocratisation of society, every student was soon entitled to career guidance and the corresponding mentality in support of 'equal opportunity' and upward mobility began to dominate. By the late sixties, every school for secondary education – including pre-vocational but not including secondary vocational education - was legally required to appoint at least one career counsellor or so-called career teacher to provide students with career services. The independent offices were also heavily subsidized by the government so as to extend their services to all pupils, but they operated mainly outside vocational education (Pere, 1986: 140).

However, by the early eighties, it became apparent that huge quantitative and qualitative discrepancies existed between the educational system and what was needed on the labour market. In addition to the independent offices for careers guidance and career teachers, two new players entered the field of career guidance. First, in 1980, regional offices for the apprenticeship system started providing pupils with information on the dual-learning system, although they offered minimal guidance for those following this route. Second, so-called "contact centres" to improve connections between schools for vocational education and the regional labour market were founded in 1985. This was done primarily by arranging expanded and better work-placement opportunities for pupils. Adults could obtain free career guidance via yet another player: the employment office, but only if they were unemployed and the employment office deemed such career advice necessary. Adults could also consult with an independent office for career guidance but at their own cost and, as Wolf (1994) has shown, very few adults did so.

Career guidance was initially rather directive (Pere, 1986) but due to the growing democratisation of society, emphasis on group discussions, and the emergence of psychological counselling in the 1970s, the field became more concerned with the process of increasing self-awareness (Meijers, 1995). Career-guidance services began to focus on the "widening of one's horizon," which Taborsky and de Grauw (1974: 116) understood to include all those activities which *"help to open the eyes of the individual for the world surrounding him, for his social situation, for the place he takes therein, for the environment that determines the scope of his views, for the degree to which he has been determined by his gender role, for his school situation, that sometimes only represents a very small world."* However, despite these new developments, the emphasis in guidance in the majority of contexts including vocational education remained on the trait-and-factor model, which meant that career services focused mainly on the psychometric testing of clients (Blommers & Lucassen, 1992; Meijers, 1995).

2. Growing insecurity

The trait-and-factor approach remained unchallenged as long as occupational structures were generally stable with well-defined occupational roles within a predictable labour market. This, however, changed rapidly in the decades that followed. In 1976, in The Netherlands there were 5500 recognized professions and 2000 job titles that could be described as “nonspecific” (e.g. policy assistant; regional advisor; data worker) (Wiegersma & Van Bochove, 1976). By 2010 the number of professions had dropped to 1073 and the list of “nonspecific positions” had grown to over 23,000 (CBS, 2012). This created a sense of uncertainty because it is much more difficult to identify with a non-specific job title than with a profession, mainly because a profession has a much clearer ‘added value’ to society. The labour market also changed rapidly. In the middle of the 1960s, the Dutch economy was at the height of its industrial phase. At that time, 45% of the labour force worked in industry. This percentage dropped to 36% by 1975 and in 1985 it dropped to 27% (Dodde, 1998, p.47-48). Available employment shifted more towards service and knowledge-based activities.

In an industrial economy upward mobility is especially linked to age and job: after a certain number of years one is promoted to the next tier but remains in the same profession (Mintzberg, 1983). This changed with the appearance of a service economy. According to Korbijn (2003, p. 45-46), there are three megatrends in the Netherlands:

- (a) the market is becoming more and more demand driven: clients want the most affordable products that are tailored to their specific needs and wishes;
- (b) there is an increase in globalization (i.e. the ‘global village’) – clients, business partners and competitors are now found around the world;
- (c) technology quickly becomes obsolete and the demands from the market can rapidly change.

The effect of these megatrends is that the market continues to change in unpredictable ways, that the ability to innovate is a more important factor in keeping up with the competition, and that knowledge has become essential. In other words, more and more employees are expected to be entrepreneurs: they have to maintain their ‘employability’ and that means they have to be self-directed in their careers (Savickas, 2013; Steenbruggen, 2003). For career guidance this also means that emotional labour (i.e. work where emotions must be applied in a conscious way) is increasingly important (Doorewaard & Benschop, 2003; Sennet, 1998).

With the above changes in mind, it is clear to see why the trait-and-factor approach is limited. One’s career path has increasingly become a ‘boundaryless career’ (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005), which makes it more and more difficult to make rational and information-based career choices (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999; Guindon & Hanna, 2002). This, combined with the insight that young people are not yet capable of making conscious and informed choices (Blakemore, Burnett & Dahl, 2010; Krieschok, Black & McKay, 2009), career guidance and counselling in the traditional sense is becoming obsolete (Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy, 2011; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). This is made even more clear in vocational education when one considers the sheer number of “wrong” choices that are made at every stage of the choice process. Between pre- and secondary vocational education, many students choose a direction that has nothing to do with their pre-vocational education. Steenaert & Boessenkool (2002) conclude, “*students choose their studies (i.e.*

topic or direction) without having a clear idea of the actual content of that choice is, nor a clear perspective of employment.” The research of Van Esch and Neuvel (2007) shows that at least 25% of students make rather unmotivated and random choices with regards to secondary vocational education. These students make the choice based on what Neuvel (2005, p. 9) calls the garbage-can model: *“this I don’t want, nor this, and I really don’t want to go that way. Alright then, it will have to be this.”* The same study shows that the students who can’t explain the reasons for the choice they have made often don’t get placed in the course of their choice. They must then settle for their “second choice” and subsequently don’t feel at home there. Not surprisingly, these students fail to complete their studies more often than the average.

According to the so-called JOB-Monitor study that is published annually by the Jongerenorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs (Organisation of Students in Vocational Education), students in vocational education are also rather dissatisfied with the guidance they receive. About 135,000 students took part in the latter research. In 2012 only 30% were satisfied with their choice of studies and the career guidance they received, 24% were dissatisfied with both, and 46% scored neutral. In this study, students were also asked to evaluate the guidance given by their mentor/employer during their work placement. The majority (60%) of students were satisfied with guidance and only 11% were (very) dissatisfied. The career guidance at schools lags far behind: only 34% of students are very satisfied, 27% are very dissatisfied, and 39% have no opinion (Jongerenorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs, 2012).

3. A strong career-learning environment

Modern career learning theories (f.i. Savickas, 2002, 2013) state that in order to find their way, students need to develop a coherent story about their future that gives them a sense of identity and direction (Wijers & Meijers, 1996). Schools should not give more (or even “better”) information to students in order to make an ‘informed’ decision (that in almost any case isn’t well-informed at all; see Van Esch & Neuvel, 2007), but should help students to develop such a story instead. Career stories emerge in a dialogue in which personal meaning is attached to concrete experiences regarding work (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Lengelle et al. 2014, 2015). In order to facilitate and have such a dialogue, the thoughts and feelings of students with respect to their work experiences must be given a central place in the conversation (Philip, 2001; Bardick et al, 2006). Students, however, do not seem to participate in a career dialogue willingly; they are rarely motivated to participate in reflective activities about their careers when these are prescribed as part of the curriculum (Mittendorff, 2010). Due to the highly theoretical nature of school curriculum, they do not see the connection between mandated ‘reflective’ activities and ‘real life’ and, therefore, regard reflection with the help of portfolios or personal development plans as largely useless (Mittendorff et al., 2008).

Research by Kuijpers, Meijers and Gundy (2011) and Kuijpers and Meijers (2012a) makes clear that career stories develop in part as career competencies are being learned, but career competencies are also the result of the learning process that shapes career identity. A career identity, in other words, is the result of experiential learning: reflection and action must go hand in hand. Kuijpers & Scheerens (2006) and Kuijpers, Schyns & Scheerens (2006)

identify five distinctive career competencies: capacity reflection (observation of capabilities that are important for one's career), motivation reflection (observation of wishes and values that are important for one's own career), work exploration (researching work and job possibilities), career directedness (making thoughtful decisions and taking actions that allow work and learning to correspond with one's capabilities and motivation and challenges at work), and finally, networking (building and maintaining contacts focused on career development).

In a large-scale empirical study among students in Dutch pre-vocational, secondary and higher vocational education, Kuijpers, Meijers and Gundy (2011) and Kuijpers and Meijers (2012a) showed that a learning environment that stimulated real-life experiences with work and a dialogue about these experiences contributed to the development and use of career competencies. Even when personality traits of students and their differing educational programs were taken into account, the characteristics of the learning environment influenced the degree to which and the kind of career competencies that were learned and used by students. In particular the career dialogue in schools and the conversation students have in the workplace proved to be crucial. Both contributed to career reflection, career-forming (work exploration and career directedness), and networking; in fact this dialogue was more strongly correlated with the development of career competencies than personality traits were.

In groups in which a career method or a so-called personal-development plan was used, students reported reflecting more on their careers. Also in groups in which students, who threatened to drop out, were engaged in a dialogue, more reflection took place. This didn't mean, however, that these students gave more direction to (or participated in 'career-forming' with regards) to their careers. That said, more traditional forms of career guidance, such as a conversation with the guidance counselor and career guidance tests, did not noticeably encourage students to use career competencies either. To encourage students to become more self-directed in their careers, it seems advisable to allow students to make their own choices about what they wanted to learn, and ask them to articulate why they wanted to learn those things. It was also found that concrete experiences in the workplace and assignments school should be used at to promote reflection among students and to help them orient themselves with regards to their career futures. Conversations about these experiences were crucial in helping students apply career competencies.

A hypothesis of the study was that a strong learning environment not only allows a student to engage in a dialogue with workplace mentors and teachers about his or her career, but must be practice-based, too. This means that students get the chance to engage in numerous and varied hands-on work experiences. Students who did more work placements, reported that they indeed gave more direction to their careers and they also networked more frequently. However, they didn't reflect more on their careers than those who didn't do work placements. To achieve reflection, a dialogue at school or in the workplace had to be set up. In other words, in order to actually apply the career competences, the organization of the curriculum or the use of certain methods and techniques was not important, but rather the engagement in and the achievement of a career dialogue.

A strong career-learning environment is still rare in Dutch vocational education. Meijers, Kuijpers and Bakker (2006) did research with 87 classes in pre-vocational education, 98 in full time and 41 in part-time secondary vocational education. Of these 226 classes only 3 had a strong and 48 had a moderate career-learning environment. In 175 of the classes, students weren't given the opportunity to talk about their work experiences and they had little or no active influence on their own school careers. In both 2006 (Meijers, Kuijpers & Bakker, 2006) as well as in 2012 (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012b) it was found that in secondary vocational education, there was no school-wide career guidance policy/plan. This means that every unit is essentially doing their own thing and not necessarily with an underlying plan that would direct those efforts. And although there was an increase in the use of the portfolio and personal-development plans, these instruments are mostly used with an aim to improve success in school but not to reflect on work or career questions (see also Mittendorff, 2010). Indeed, it seems teachers are quick to send students to the career-advice centre for help when they encounter problems with their studies. It is noteworthy, however, that in the care-sector, there is a stronger learning environment for career learning. Programs that focus on caring professions are more successful in setting up integrated career orientation and guidance, than other programs of study. Technical training programs score the lowest in this area; career orientation and guidance is often very traditional in these settings. It's also clear, that in the lower levels of the training programs (level 1 and 2) more guidance is done by teachers. Therefore, the guidance offered is more monological in nature than between students and teachers at level 3 and 4 where teachers have more training in career guidance.

A strong learning environment is also not present in the businesses where students do their work placements. Meijers (2004) interviewed 27 students and 18 mentors from the administrative sector and the metal industry. According to students, the work placement is rich in context but poor in giving them the chance to have a reflective dialogue or to be coached. There is often a positive relationship between students and mentors, but these relationships are focused mainly on teaching 'job-related skills' and aimed at job socialization so that students learn how to behave at work according to the dominant norms and values. Mentors and other workers view whether the student achieves 'maturity' during the work placement as a rather random side effect. This is also the view held by the school-based mentor; everyone involved considers this a coincidental process, not something that can be stimulated deliberately. The research shows that students usually work within a 'controlled' situation with their work-place mentor – situations where job skills are of primary importance and where there is little room for so-called 'core problems' or work-place dilemmas (see also the chapter of Onstenk in this volume).

4. Career dialogue

A longitudinal study, that Kuijpers, Meijers and Winters (2010) performed in a school for secondary vocational education, showed that to achieve an actual career dialogue in the current education system is difficult. Quinn (1991) showed that in organizations that remain stable over a long period of time, a culture develops that is attractive to personality types who value output, control, and management. Especially in full-time education, the culture with respect to the interaction between students and teachers barely changed between

1920 and 1980. Everything was focused on the efficient transfer of established knowledge in the form of an established curriculum. The teacher was the central figure who was seen to be enthusiastically transferring knowledge to students from his or her precise and well-defined area of expertise. Although school culture has changed since 1980, most of the teachers in Dutch secondary vocational education had their teacher training before or just after 1980. It isn't surprising, therefore, that even today, schools rarely offer room for the development or expression of student narratives (Winters et al., 2009). Moreover because educational culture is still largely monological, most teachers are very uncertain about their abilities to help students in developing a career story (Kuijpers, Meijers & Winters, 2010; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012b). 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 on the chosen approach.

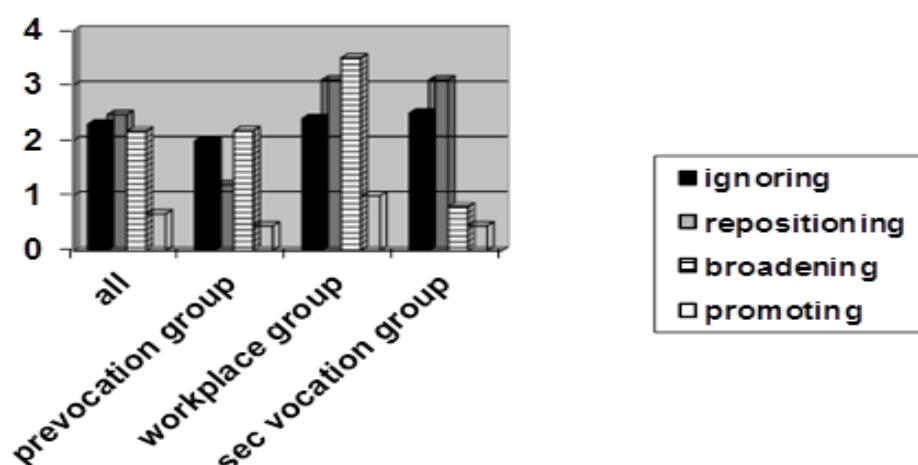
In a series of studies, Winters et al. (2009, 2012, 2013) used Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) as a framework for understanding and analyzing how conversations about placements foster career construction. The starting point of the Dialogical Self Theory is that the formation of an identity is dialogical in nature because the Self is actually a kind of 'polyphonic novel' or combination of various voices ('I-positions') embodied in one person. The dialogical self is not static and is inherently transformed by the exchanges amongst I-positions (the internal dialogue with ourselves) and with other people (the external dialogue). From the perspective of the Dialogical Self Theory, the trajectory from real-life experiences to an appropriate career choice ideally starts with the formulation of an I-position, the subsequent broadening of this I-position by means of a dialogue to other relevant I-positions, and runs, via consecutive dialogical shifts, from these various I-positions to a meta-position and from this meta-position to the formulation of a promoter-position. By "I" positions, we mean that a student is asked to enter a dialogue in a multi-voiced way – experiences may be discussed in ambiguous and contradictory ways (e.g. I like working with seniors; I don't like working with them when they don't interact; I like working with them when we are both quiet). However, in order to turn dialogues into competencies and actions, an ability to witness the presence and influence of the various "I" positions is needed as well. This is where a meta-position is valuable, as it allows the individual to view one's I-positions from a distance. In career learning this means that we are able to develop and express various perspectives and explore options without becoming 'married' to any one of them from the outset. The integrative understanding gained through a meta-position is intended to lead us to action or at the very least to the intention to act, while we remain aware of the complexity and changeability of our work environment and ourselves. The 'position' that is capable of taking action, with the intention to give a developmental impetus to future I-positions, is called a promoter position.

However, as mentioned before, there are doubts as to whether such career dialogues are actually stimulated in schools or at work. Winters et al. (2009) looked at conversations about placements in Dutch secondary vocational education. The research showed that it is not the student who is at the heart of the conversation, but the curriculum and furthermore that mentors in school and from work placement talk mostly *to* (65%) and *about* (21%) students, and hardly ever *with* (9%) them. The students sit with their teachers and their mentors from practice, but this does not mean that they can take part in the conversation and direct it to

reflect on their personal learning goals. Little opportunity is given to students to express what they think of their experiences in the work place, let alone about what they have learned or wanted to learn from them. Training conversations are almost completely aimed at the evaluation of the student and on transferring expert opinions from teacher and mentor to students.

Winters et al. (2012, 2013) furthermore explored the quality of career conversations in three culturally different contexts within vocational education: conversations between teachers and 15-year old students in pre-vocational education ('prevocational group'), conversations between teachers, workplace mentors and 18-19 year old students in secondary vocational education ('secondary vocational group') and conversations between workplace mentors and 18-19 year old students in secondary vocational education ('workplace group'). Results showed that the average conversation does have potential with regards to constructing a career identity. Positioning (i.e. formulating an I-, meta- or promoter position) does happen and is done mainly by students themselves. In pre-vocational education, more I-positions are formulated than in secondary vocational education and more than in the workplace, probably due to the existing culture of carefulness (i.e. much attention is paid to the well-being of each individual student). In the workplace, more meta- and promoter positions are formulated than in both other contexts, probably due to a business-like culture in which every individual is held responsible for the success of the group. In secondary vocational education, the conversations are longest, but they offer even less room for positioning than the less-standardised and shorter inquiries about how students' placements went in pre-vocational education. This is probably due to the fact that 65% of all students in secondary vocational education enter the labour market immediately after completing their course of studies. This is one of the reasons, the quality of secondary vocational education is under close surveillance by the Department of Education; employers and politicians force schools to use standardized evaluative procedures, which leaves little room for the narratives of both students and teachers (for a description of the same tendency in the USA, see Nichols & Berliner, 2007). A dialogue was not dominant in any of the contexts studied. In other words, when a student 'positions him/herself', teacher and mentor strategies are rarely directed at stimulating the broadening of those positions, let alone focused on the formulation of meta- and promoter positions.

Table 1. Number of strategies used to respond to positioning in an average conversation, split for the three contexts



Winters et al. (2013) were especially interested in the response of teachers to student positioning. They found four different strategies: ignoring the *I*-position (ignoring), re-positioning by talking on behalf of the student (re-positioning), broadening the *I*-position without conclusion (broadening), and dialogue in the direction of the formulation of a promoter-position (promoting). Table 1 shows that the three studied contexts show strong similarities when it comes to using strategies “ignoring” and “promoting”. In an average conversation a formulated position is ignored twice (to 2,5 times for the workplace and secondary vocational group), while per conversation an *I*-position stimulates a dialogue resulting in the formulation of a promoter-position less than once (0,5 times for the prevocational and secondary vocational group). The strategy “re-positioning” happens twice per average conversation (once per conversation in the prevocational group and three times per conversation in the workplace and secondary vocational group). When it comes to “promoting” as a strategy, an average conversation shows this dynamic twice (the workplace group stands out with a average of 3,5 times per conversation as compared to the prevocational and secondary vocational groups). The conclusion is obvious: positioning is done by the students themselves and teachers/mentors respond most often with non-dialogical strategies (i.e. ignoring and re-positioning).

5. Teachers

The fact that teachers respond with non-dialogical strategies is due at least partly a result of feelings of disempowerment. Teachers reported that the conversations they had with students are usually about school progress and rarely about self and future (Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy, 2011; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012). It was notable that 40% of the teachers felt that their work as career teachers was not well-supported by either the school or other professionals working in the field; 63% of teachers reported that they received almost no support from their managers and colleagues and 54% of teachers reported that they received almost no support from employers or other professionals. The current socio-political climate of education in Western societies favours an approach to teaching and learning in which test preparation and scripted curricula are the preferred methods (Hillocks, 2002; Marshall, 2009). In The

Netherlands this tendency is illustrated by the fact that every secondary vocational school is forced to reintroduce Dutch language and mathematics as part of the scripted curriculum (see also the [chapters of ... in this volume](#)). The focus on standardization and high-stakes testing has led to a narrow view of what counts as teaching and learning (Franciosi, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003; Lipman, 2004; Ravitch, 2010). The *Standards Era* policies do not focus on making time for narrative and dialogical encounters with students, leaving teachers even less experienced with this “largely verbal process” that entails “a collaborative relationship” (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p.10). Many teachers, however, explicitly ask to be trained in initiating a career dialogue with their students (Meijers, 2008; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012b).

Kuijpers & Meijers (2011) conducted a study about the effects of teacher training on career dialogues promoting career competency development in students. For the quantitative part of the study, a quasi-experimental research design was used to measure effects among 2291 students. Video-recordings of conversations were used for qualitative research. An important conclusion of this study is that a two-day off-the-job training program for teachers was insufficient to achieve significant changes in guidance conversations, measured at a student level. However, off-the-job training combined with individual coaching and team coaching on-the-job, proved to be effective in improving guidance conversations from a student perspective. An actual improvement requires being guided in applying the off-the-job training in the teacher’s own context. Not only the quantitative study showed changes in guidance conversations after the training program as reported by student, but changes were also seen in the recordings of conversations. In other words, teachers asked more career-oriented questions and students gave more career-oriented answers.

Despite the positive effects of the training and the fact that many teachers asked for training in career conversations, it is not easy to motivate teachers to participate in such programs. A need for professionalization is not self-evident to teachers (Van Driel, 2008). They often prefer short off-the-job training courses to learn how to work with specific instruments (see also the [chapters of ... in this volume](#)). The training described by Kuijpers & Meijers, in contrast, is not only more time consuming (a combination of off-the-job and on-the-job training), it also contributes to changes in one’s professional identity. Development of personality traits and qualities (i.e. identity) only takes place when those who are learning find the content meaningful (and that is something quite different than content being considered ‘necessary’; see Hensel, 2010). Teachers find content meaningful when they co-create their own training programs (Van Veen, Zwart, Meirink & Verloop, 2010) in negotiation with their managers (Lodders, 2013).

It follows from the above that work/learning environments are required that:

- *are practice based*: the learning process of teachers and middle-managers must be based on questions and problems that arise from actual innovative practices that are intentional and in response to concrete problems that result based on those practices. The theory required to explain these problems should be offered “just in time” and “only in the amount needed” to address these problems. In addition, the learning environment must be clearly structured, which means that teachers and middle managers should not have too many innovations occurring simultaneously. In practice, this means that the number of innovations running should be diminished and/or that innovations should be more integrated and convergent. More

consideration should be given to learning ability or readiness (in addition to the learning that is desired) of teachers (in terms of their capacity to carry out and carry on with such an innovation load).

- *promote dialogical interactions*: dealing with concrete problems will only lead to changes in the professional identity of teachers and middle-managers (and with that to truly innovative practices) if a conversation between all parties concerned occurs about the personal and societal meaning of one's work. The kind of dialogue that is needed, is described by Shotter (1993, p.20) as "*a socially constructed myriad of spontaneous, responsive, practical, unselfconscious, but contested interactions*", a conversation that is "*quite the opposite of the apparent representation of dialogue as converging upon a single ultimate 'Truth'*". As will be clear from Shotter's quote, dialogue is something completely different than a discussion. A dialogue means to show and accept uncertainty (see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).
- *fosters cooperation* and consensus on the basis of a clear and strategic management vision: initiating and keeping such a dialogue going demands transformational leadership (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005; Geijssel, Meijers, & Wardekker, 2007). This type of leadership simultaneously provides direction based on the strategic vision, but also creates space for teachers and middle managers to set out their own tactics to achieve desired goals. At the same time, it only creates the necessary space when upper management keeps a dialogue going about the concrete work experiences of teachers and middle-managers.

6. Conclusion

It should be clear from the above that real career dialogues are needed to support students in developing the 21st skills they will need to succeed on the current complex labour market. Students must be helped to develop career competencies and a career identity in order to become intrinsically motivated about their career choices and actual work environments. It is also clear that so far students do not get much help in this area; strong career-learning environments are lacking in almost all Dutch schools for vocational education. Students do get real-life work experiences by doing work placements, but they do not get enough of an opportunity to talk about those experiences during and after their placements. The result is that these experiences don't have much meaning in terms of a career development: most students are unable to cultivate a sense of identity and direction from their work experiences alone. With respect to career guidance, teachers feel they receive little support from their managers and colleagues, although many teachers recognize a need to be trained in initiating career dialogues with their students. In order to make training successful in terms of new guidance behaviours, it is essential that school managers create a strong career-learning environment for teachers, though the *Standards Era* policies that dominate Dutch vocational education at the moment, leave managers little room to do so.

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