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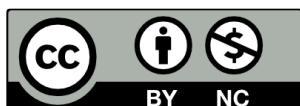
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Learners' Perceptions of a Career Guidance Curriculum in Different School-based Support Systems in Switzerland

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This paper examines the different functions and further potential of a curriculum of career guidance in lower secondary school and bridge-year courses. With a focus on young adults following a non-linear pathway to post-compulsory education in the Swiss Canton of Zurich, we answer the questions why bridge-year courses are attended (RQ1) and how career guidance is perceived (RQ2). Furthermore, optimization segments for a curriculum of career guidance were analysed from a learner-centred perspective (RQ3). Taking a mixed-method approach, we combine data from a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative problem-centred interviews. To examine differences in attendance of bridge-year courses and the perceived usefulness of supporting actors, quantitative data were analysed by mean ranges. The in-depth qualitative data were analysed using a structured content analysis. The findings underline the importance of an individualized approach to career guidance in both lower secondary school and on bridge-year courses. There is further potential for a curriculum of career guidance in lower secondary school to strengthen the orientation function, taking into account the potential of social structural reproduction. Bridge-year courses should rethink their compensation function given the diversity of their attendees.

Keywords: vocational orientation, career guidance, school-based support systems, lower secondary school, bridge-year courses

Introduction

Transitions from school to work can no longer be considered linear and homogenous processes, but as destandardized and extended (Walther 2006, 121-124). For employment-centred transition systems, the first transition from lower secondary school to post-compulsory education or vocational education and training (VET)¹ in particular is an important turning point in a person's educational and vocational career (Stolz and Gonon 2013). This importance is due to the early tracking school system and the highly determining system of following routes in Switzerland (Hupka-Brunner et al. 2011). But not all young adults in Switzerland find a direct entry into post-compulsory education or training. Longitudinal studies such as TREE (transitions from education to employment) or statistical data from the Federal Statistical Office show that about 15-20% of young adults choose to take a transitional option² after compulsory school (Meyer 2014; BFS 2016). The attendance rate varies between Swiss cantons, from 4% up to 46% (Landert and Eberli 2015, 55). Transitional options can be seen as a structural response for young people following a non-linear pathway to post-compulsory education or training.

Transitional options have been one of the most rapidly growing educational markets in the Swiss educational system since the 1990s (Wettstein, Schmid, and Gonon 2017, 193). Bridge-year courses, as one of these transitional options, are of growing importance not only in terms of the enrolment rate. They are more and more regularly on offer to a particular group of young adults (Landert and Eberli 2015). Extended post-

¹ In the following sections we will use the abbreviation 'VET'.

² There are different types of transitional options. In Switzerland, they are funded both publicly and privately. Their organizational structures can be school-based, work-based (pre-apprenticeship or preparatory courses) or informal (e.g., language courses). In this article we focus on school-based bridge-year courses.

compulsory transitions and the growing importance of transitional options can similarly be observed in other employment-centred countries, such as Germany (see Lex and Geier 2010).

Since the early 2000s, critical voices have been reflecting on the use and efficacy of transitional options. Transitional options have a reputation as ‘gathering points’ – a colloquial expression – for groups at risk of not finding a linear route into post-compulsory education or training (Sacchi and Meyer 2016; Lex and Geier 2010). For Switzerland, Stolz (2013) discusses the problematic shift towards a supply-induced demand for transitional options. According to Künzli and Scherrer (2013), transitional options serve to conceal structural problems caused by early selection and allow the reasons for failure to be seen as individual rather than structural. This may be considered even more relevant, because in Switzerland as well as in Germany the proportion of participants varies significantly, depending on the previous level of ability³ at lower secondary school. Those coming from school tracks with lower requirements were regularly over-represented in bridge-year courses in Switzerland and Germany (BFS 2016; Beicht 2009). Furthermore, the probability of participation can be explained by personal factors (e.g., social status, gender or migration) and contextual factors (e.g., differences between cantons and language regions) (Sacchi and Meyer 2016). The growing importance of transitional options and critical reflection on the questions ‘Who are they for?’ and ‘What are they for?’ highlight the relevance of taking a closer look at their curricula.

³The Swiss educational system segregates at an early age. Lower secondary school is divided into performance-based groups with two or three levels (depending on the respective cantonal educational system).

A second focus will be on support provided by lower secondary schools and related actors such as teachers, since vocational orientation is a binding duty for lower secondary schools and therefore part of the curriculum (Dreer 2013, 47).

Existing studies mainly focus on the structures, functions and aims of bridge-year courses and lower secondary schools. This study focuses on vocational orientation as a process. As an institutional provider of vocational orientation, career guidance is of great importance. It is therefore our aim to determine the learner-centred perception of its utility in various institutional support systems (e.g., lower secondary school and bridge-year courses). Since previous research indicates differences in participation in bridge-year courses, we will also illuminate the reasons for attending bridge-year courses. In more detail, we address the following research questions.

- (1) What are the reasons for attending a bridge-year course after compulsory school?
- (2) How do young adults perceive career guidance at lower secondary school and in bridge-year courses?

This can provide more information about why a significant group of young adults do not choose to follow linear pathways into vocational education and training or another form of post-compulsory education. Because of its special importance for young adults at risk of not finding a smooth path from school to work in Switzerland, it seems important to give them a voice in the further development of a curriculum of career guidance. Therefore the third research question focuses on this aim.

- (3) What do participants of bridge-year courses suggest as areas of optimization for a curriculum of career guidance at lower secondary school and bridge-year courses?

All of the research questions will be analysed making use of data from the mixed-method project called GÜRB. These results can be discussed in the light of recent and ongoing curricular modifications to career guidance at Swiss lower secondary schools as well as in bridge-year courses.

In the following section we start with a description of the Swiss education system at secondary level, followed by specification of the theoretical framework. In the second section, 'Methods', we describe the research design and research methods applied. The key findings for answering the research questions are then presented, and discussed against the theoretical framework in the concluding section.

Contextual and Theoretical Background

The Swiss Education System at Secondary Level

After 11 years of compulsory education, less than 30% of young adults in Switzerland choose a general education route, while the majority follow VET. These differences are already anticipated by early selection after eight school years, which divides pupils at lower secondary school into two or three tracks (the academically most demanding track, the intermediate track and the academically least demanding track). Figure 1 shows the Swiss education system at secondary level.

[figure 1 here]

While most young adults find a linear route into upper secondary education, a significant minority of around 25% do not find direct access to the post-compulsory education and training system (BFS 2016; Meyer 2018); around 20% of these take a transitional option. Extended transitions are made by about 27% of those coming from a lower secondary school less demanding track, while this proportion is about 6% for those from the academically most demanding track (BFS 2016). Following the

transitional option, the vast majority of young adults transfer to initial VET after one or two years.

The Role of Career Guidance in a Young Adult's Own Vocational Orientation Process

Vocational orientation is on the one hand an active and constructive process of young people's learning experiences and perceptions (Müller 2009, 37-38). As we perceive vocational orientation as being at least partly individual-driven, this theoretical perspective is in line with Evans's (2002, 262) reflections on the concept of bounded agency. Agency stresses the individual, proactive decision-making process of young adults in the context of their vocational orientation (Rudd and Evans 1998). This understanding strengthens the degree of decision-making, which is, according to the authors, often underestimated in theoretical reflections on transitional processes. According to Evans (2002) structure and agency can be understood as being interrelated. Three dimensions of boundaries were mentioned: the social dimension, internal/external control processes and the degree of social reproduction/transformation (ibid.). For the first boundary of agency, Evans (2002) refers to Beck's (1992) individualized society thesis, involving the diffusion and disappearance of social classes. This leads to more choices and also to new uncertainties and risks in individual careers. The second boundary refers to the social structures, institutions and cultural norms, which individuals are embedded in (Evans 2002). The third boundary refers to the degree of social mobility, which influences the situationally determined rationality of action (ibid.). In contrast to the position of rational choice, social, cultural and procedural contextual conditions lead the actor to make decisions that are subjectively, but not objectively, rational (Evans 2002). Bringing these aspects together, Evans (2002, 262) summarizes: '[...] we have looked through the lens of agency as a socially

situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures, to find the concept of *bounded agency*'. Taking into account these different theoretical reflections, the individual is understood to play a part in his orientation process, even if this is limited to an individually differing scope of action.

On the other hand, for decades theoretical and empirical evidence has shown the importance of social embedding to this active construction process of vocational orientation (e.g., Granovetter 1974; Putnam 2001). Decision-making as part of a process of vocational orientation can therefore be perceived to be influenced by personal social resources as well as by social and economic conditions (Hirschi, 2007). Social resources with regard to vocational orientation can be grouped into personal (e.g., parental network or informal support), school-based (e.g., career guidance lessons), institutional (e.g., career guidance) and information sources (e.g., internet) (Hirschi 2007). Within this range, the focus of the article will be on school-based as well as institutional career guidance.

The following section will also consider, as a part of this institutional support, the different functions of a curriculum of career guidance at lower secondary school and in bridge-year courses.

Career Guidance at Lower Secondary School and in Bridge-Year Courses

In a federal country such as Switzerland, career guidance appears in different forms and involves a range of actors. Understanding young adults as decision-makers requires a constructivist view of career guidance as career competence development (Kuijpers, Meijers, and Gundy 2011; Savickas 2005). To enhance the competence of active decision-making, according to Kuijpers, Meijers, and Gundy (2011), the learning

environment needs: opportunities for real-life work experience, dialogue-based participation by the teacher and the student, the creation of more choices and ongoing guidance. The focus of this article will be on analysis of career guidance as a subject at lower secondary school and on how it takes place during a bridge-year course.

On a structural level alone, differences in the status of career guidance between lower secondary school and bridge-year courses are apparent. While at lower secondary school career guidance can be seen as a minor subject with little attention to the individual, career guidance in bridge-year courses is the main aim.

In the following sections, the different roles of career guidance for lower secondary school and bridge-year courses in Switzerland will be discussed.

Lower secondary school

The role of schools can theoretically be understood as providing different ways for society to reproduce itself: qualification, selection and integration (see Fend 1981, 2012). While the first way refers to the reproduction of cultural values within society through the transfer of skills and knowledge, the second can be seen as reproduction of the social structure through the distribution of positions (Fend 2012, 163). Fend's (2012) theoretical approach allows a critical view of the role of schools; for example the aim of a curriculum of career guidance can be understood not just as a tool of individualized support but also as a mandate to transfer values and maintain the structure of society. From this point of view teachers address individuals as members of social groups. Career guidance is part of the curricula of lower secondary schools, which structures in advance the opportunities and counselling for post-compulsory educational and vocational options (e.g., Neuenschwander 2014).

Whether career guidance in lower secondary school serves to reproduce cultural values and consolidate the social structure will be empirically examined.

Bridge-year courses

While career guidance at lower secondary school already focuses more on VET and less on general education, this orientation is even stronger for career guidance in bridge-year courses. As an interim solution to the transition between compulsory education and mostly VET at upper secondary level, bridge-year courses in Switzerland have different functions, while their core is perceived as follows (Meyer 2003; Sacchi and Meyer 2016):

- (1) **Compensation:** Addressing individual deficits of previous lower secondary education. These deficits may concern education, language or behaviour, but also tasks with regard to job applications (e.g., writing an application letter, presentation skills). The focus is on the development of individual skills that are supposed to be relevant for VET.
- (2) **Orientation / career choice:** A second focus of bridge-year courses is the individual-centred focus on career possibilities. Learners are supported in their decision-making, but also helped towards choosing direct post-compulsory school routes. Again, the focus is on VET. This function can be seen as part of the broader aim of promoting maturity regarding work.
- (3) **Systemic buffer:** Even though supply (job applications) exceeds demand on the Swiss apprenticeship market, the imbalance between interests on the demand side and requirements not being met makes a linear entry into post-compulsory education and training even more complicated (for the Canton of Zurich see Bildungsdirektion 2018). Addressing the mismatch between skills profile and apprenticeship offer can be seen as the third function of bridge-year courses. This function was also the reason that (public) transitional options came into

being, due to exceptionally high youth unemployment in Switzerland in the early 1990s and the period 2002-2004 (Landert and Eberli 2015).

In contrast to lower secondary school, vocational orientation and traditional school subjects are of equal importance in the bridge-year course curriculum. This curricular shift from traditional subjects towards vocational orientation is even more important, taking into account research findings indicating that the orientation function plays a much more important role than the compensation function (see Sacchi and Meyer 2016). A possible reason is that these institutions are geared to bridging the gap between compulsory schooling and the world of work, which increases pressure on the orientation function (see Meyer 2014).

Methods

Research Design

To answer the research questions, this article uses data collected within a broader mixed-method research project on *successful transitions into vocational education and training for different groups at risk* (see Introduction). A quantitative questionnaire for young adults (n=310) was carried out in 2016. These young adults participated in various bridge-year courses in the Canton of Zurich during the school years 2010/2011 (30.3 %), 2011/2012 (26.8 %), 2012/2013 (42.3 %), 2013/2014 (0.3 %) and 2014/2015 (0.3 %). For this sample, an average age of 20.77 years was calculated (SD = 1.13). In terms of gender distribution, 31.8% of the subsample were male and 68.2% were female. With regard to the lower secondary school track 53.1 % attended the intermediate track, 44.6 % attended the lowest track and 2.3 % attended the academically most demanding track.

The questionnaire focused on, among other things, risk factors, success indicators and the perceived relevance, use and usefulness of different support systems. The reasons for attendance, perceived effect and positive and negative aspects of attending bridge-year courses were investigated, with a special focus on bridge-year courses.

Based on an identification of distinct risk and success patterns based on latent class analysis (Gebhardt et al. 2017), the qualitative sampling structure followed as an in-depth case study. Therefore, sampling for qualitative data can be described as an intensity sampling process (Patton 1990) focusing on representatives of interesting risk and success patterns. These qualitative interviews (n=12) were carried out in 2017, applying a semi-structured method. Interviews started with an open question concerning the description and experience of the participant's own vocational choices and vocational orientation process. After a second open question on different support systems, a semi-structured part focused on recommendations for optimization of the systems.

Measures and Analyses

This paper aims to present an individual-centred view with regard to the perception of career guidance and its curricular development. We start with a learner-centred view of the functions of bridge-year courses, analysing the quantitative question 'Why attend a bridge-year course?'. We ranged potential reasons by their means (M) on a Likert scale from 1 (I totally disagree) to 4 (I totally agree). This descriptive analysis was followed by an analysis of variance to detect differences between the distinct patterns of risk and success. For the quantitative part, the perceived usefulness of support offers was also considered. Possible support offers were evaluated on a Likert scale from 1 (not useful

at all) to 4 (very useful). This scale will be taken into account to see the importance of different actors and support offers for young adults in vocational orientation, with a focus on actors from lower secondary school and bridge-year courses. We will look at the importance of support offers, by ranking them according to their means (M) of perceived importance.

Based on the patterns of risk and success (latent class analysis), 12 interviews were conducted with five groups showing interesting patterns of risk and success. The data were fully transcribed according to the transcription rules of Dresing and Pehl (2011) and analysed with the data analysis software MAXQDA, following the systematic steps of a structured qualitative content analysis (see Mayring 2015; Krippendorff 2013). While the deductive main categories (vocational orientation process, support, bridge-year courses, optimizing segments, future plans) were formulated as a rough structure, inductive subcategory development was summarized from the material. This combination allows a circular and open analysis. The reliability of coding was considered through subjective assessment (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012).

Results

Reasons for the Attendance of Bridge-year Courses

To answer the first question (RQ1), we look briefly at the reasons for attending a transitional option after lower secondary school. This provides a first indication of the objectives of bridge-year courses according to attendance. Furthermore, we are provided with some indications of how this additional year takes place in a young adult's vocational orientation process (RQ2). The following figure 2 shows a ranking of the average relevance (mean) for the reasons to attend a transitional option.

As seen in figure 2, the most common reasons given were not being able to find an apprenticeship ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.13$), needing more time for vocational orientation ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.13$) or increasing one's chances of finding a good apprenticeship ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.05$). In fourth place and still with a relatively high relevance, further personal development ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.12$) met with fairly high approval as a reason for attendance. The average means for the other reasons show relatively little approval. Therefore, from the point of view of learners the main functions seem to be the systemic buffer function (reasons 1 and 3) on the one hand and the orientation function (reasons 2 and 4) of bridge-year courses on the other. Interestingly, reasons pointing to a compensation function (such as filling educational gaps, gaining general or special (professional) experience) are of less importance for attending a transitional option according to the respondents. The average values of these reasons were below the scale mean, which indicates low agreement.

[Figure 2 here]

To complete this picture of possible reasons for extending one's transition, data from the qualitative study show the three most mentioned individual challenges in vocational orientation: (1) lack of vocational maturity, (2) lack of vocational orientation and (3) lack of information. The first one points out the fact that most of the interview participants did not feel old or mature enough to make such an important decision, as the following excerpt shows:

Bettina:⁴ Yes, I found it really difficult there, because I wasn't AT ALL ready to decide what to do afterwards. And that's why I finally came up with the bridge-year course, so as to have another year to consider what I WANT and to get a little closer to adulthood. And there it was much better actually.

In this quotation Bettina expresses a feeling of not being ready for an important and long-during decision at the end of lower secondary school. As the statement shows, the feeling of not being ready for a vocational decision is the reason for Bettina to participate in a bridge-year course. Therefore, the orientation function is of major importance in her choice.

The importance of the orientation function of bridge-year courses is also highlighted by the second category, lack of vocational orientation. The lack of information highlights the importance of career guidance at lower secondary school, as information on vocational options is perceived as being insufficient at lower secondary school.

Perception of Career Guidance in Different Support Systems

Assuming that the vocational orientation process is individually controlled but also a socially embedded process, this section concentrates on supporting actors and offers. Because the paper focuses on differences between career guidance at lower secondary school and bridge-year courses, we pay special attention to these two groups of actors. The following figure 3 shows a ranking of the average perceived usefulness (M) of different support offers. In the opinion of the participants in bridge-year courses, the most useful support was provided by parents and the internet.

⁴ Names were replaced using same gender and same cultural origin. Interviews were conducted in Swiss German with an idiomatic translation to English. Words which were specially emphasized by the interviewees were written in CAPITAL LETTERS.

[Figure 3 here]

Interestingly, given focus on institutional actors of school and bridge-year courses that follows, their support is perceived very differently according to the participants. While the perceived usefulness of the teachers of bridge-year courses achieves a high mean score of 3.01 (or 'fairly useful'), teachers at compulsory school were on average judged as being 'not very useful' ($M = 2.07$). Furthermore, while the teachers of bridge-year courses ranked third, just below parents and the internet, teachers at lower secondary school came almost last. The picture is similar for other lower secondary school actors such as social workers, principals or offers such as information events at school. The qualitative data give further possible reasons for this relatively low ranking of teachers' support at lower secondary school. The lack of support at lower secondary school was summarized by three reasons: (1) bad relationships with teachers (2), teachers' lack of knowledge of vocational options and (3) other curricular priorities.

As the first reason shows the importance of a good teacher-learner relationship, which is not the focus of this paper, the other two reasons should be looked at more closely. According to the interviewees, the teachers' lack of knowledge of vocational options (2) is due to a lack of personal experience of VET routes. This is described, for example, by Claire in the following quotation:

Claire: But they couldn't help us, because I think NO teacher, at least as far as I know, has been in this situation. MOST of the teachers attended grammar school and studied. And then they have to teach us, 13- or 14-year olds, HOW to look for an apprenticeship when they themselves have NO idea because they don't know what job opportunities exist.

In the quotation Claire refers to the divided post-obligatory educational routes in Switzerland. According to her, this does not just imply a formal separation but also a lack of understanding and knowledge of other routes than the one they chose themselves. So, as teachers usually follow the general education route which leads them directly to university and teacher education, in the interviewee's opinion they have no (practical) knowledge of job opportunities to find a VET place. Therefore, the lack of guidance is linked to a lack of practical knowledge on the part of the teachers. Claire describes a misunderstanding between teachers, who represent a general education route, and young people with an interest in VET. The teachers' lack of knowledge of possible vocational pathways, was highlighted by other interviewees as well.

The interviews identified the curricular priorities of lower secondary schooling as a further explanation for the lack of support, i.e., (3) the focus on topics other than vocational guidance.

Adrian: The teacher in school has not much time, after all, because he has to follow the curriculum. School is more important than finding an apprenticeship in the end. At least in our case it was like this. You have a certain plan which you have to stick to and mostly it is already rather under pressure.

In the quotation Adrian differentiates between school subject curriculum and career guidance – but does not count the latter as a part of the school curriculum. So the interviewee sees a clear hierarchy of traditional subjects and career guidance. According to Adrian, this hierarchy is at least partly due to the teachers' limited scope of action. So the main problem seems to be the insufficient importance given to career guidance by the curricular structure.

As vocational orientation is seen as an individual process of great importance, the need for more individualized support at school as well as in bridge-year courses

figured prominently in the interviews. This will be discussed in the following section, with other learner-centred recommendations for optimization of career guidance.

Learner-centred Recommendations for Optimization

To give a response to RQ3, learner-centred recommendations for an optimization of career guidance, the inductively created subcategories of qualitative interviews provide a first overview (Table 1). The subcategories were structured on the horizontal axis by the main function of bridge-year courses named by Meyer (2003). On the vertical axis, the recommendations were separated by the two institutional systems (lower secondary school and bridge-year courses). The three most mentioned subcategories are printed in bold type.

[Table 1 here]

According to the interviews, the most important objective from the learner's point of view should be a more individualized curriculum of career guidance. The interviewees complained that the present support failed to take their individual biographies and educational aspirations seriously for career guidance purposes, and instead used standardized programmes and offers. All the interviewees mentioned a need for more individualized support at lower secondary school as a central optimization segment, while four participants also said the same about bridge-year courses. For some of the interviewees this was the most important topic in the interview. For example, Flutura describes in the interview how she had been looking for someone to give her a voice in her vocational orientation process. The interviewee puts this directly in the following excerpt:

Flutura: And that you are really helped and not just the comprehensive package in the classroom. What should be introduced: being really INDIVIDUALLY addressed as a learner.

Flutura differentiates between the ‘comprehensive package’ and individualized support. The sentence can be understood as a criticism of cooling out strategies by teachers at lower secondary school and bridge-year courses, which was experienced by some interviewees. Being taken seriously as a person with certain capabilities and career plans is what seems to be most important for Flutura. A similar picture emerges when the statements by other interviewees are taken into account, which describe the need for more personalized support during their vocational orientation.

Further segments which were of high importance for the interviewees when it came to lower secondary school were ‘VET representatives in school’ and ‘more information’. Most mentioned for bridge-year courses were: ‘increasing the level of difficulty’ and a shift towards ‘workplace-related training’. As seen in table 1, apart from individualized support, the segments of optimization differ between lower secondary school and bridge-year courses. While information seemed to be a more important task for optimization at lower secondary school, compensation was the focus when it came to optimizing bridge-year courses. The most mentioned issues apart from individualized support will be discussed in the following section, based on sample quotations, starting with issues at lower secondary school and followed by those in bridge-year courses.

VET representatives at lower secondary school

Letting representatives of VET talk in lower secondary schools about their experiences was already a core optimizing element in an open question in the quantitative part of the study. As this was also a focus of the interviews, we take a deeper look at how this can

be understood in the following quotation:

Loran: So, people who I know to be already in vocational training, they KNOW a lot. They know a lot more. They are in the midst of what they are learning, what they are working. Had I had CONTACT with learners back then, I would have had a much greater insight into professions than I ever had in school.

Loran regretted not having an insider's view during his vocational orientation process at lower secondary school, which would have allowed him to get an idea of different professions. In the quotation a differentiation is made between the practical knowledge of learners already being in VET and the theoretical knowledge communicated at school. Practical knowledge is perceived by Loran as being most important in his vocational orientation process. While Loran speaks of peers in VET, other interviewees also mentioned professionals such as trainee counsellors. Therefore, close collaboration between schools and providers of VET was important to learners.

More information at lower secondary school

More information was wanted for career guidance at lower secondary school. This subcategory brought together a number of issues. Some participants wanted more information about specific careers. Some quotations indicated a desire to get a more realistic view of the challenging sides of career options. Others demanded more information about the diversity of career options in the VET market. The following quotation highlights two of these issues; Kavitha wishes she had known more about the different options and had more insider information.

Kavitha: In my opinion one could show children a more diverse picture of professional options. (...) I have a feeling; we all have been thrown in at the deep end: 'now go for it'. And then you either interrupt your apprenticeship or you go on with it. You have to look after yourself. And I know A LOT of people who

actually stopped their apprenticeship because it wasn't what they had expected. I for one didn't dare quit. I had a feeling I wouldn't find anything else.

Kavitha perceives vocational orientation as hardly being self-directed, as she lacked the information to make her capable of decision-making. In the quotation Kavitha pleads for more diversity of professional offers, which she relates to a declining risk of dropping out of training. The feeling of being 'thrown in at the deep end' is also expressed by other participants and shows great uncertainty in their own vocational orientation. For Kavitha, dropping out of an apprenticeship in such a situation seems a fairly normal solution and not even the worst one because it is the apprentice's own decision. For the learners, having a broad enough knowledge of the diversity of vocational opportunities to be able to decide is vital to a self-directed vocational orientation process.

Increasing the level of difficulty in bridge-year courses

In comparison to lower secondary school, the young adults interviewed were mostly satisfied with career guidance provided by the institutions running bridge-year courses. Therefore, the following optimization segments play a comparatively small role.

An important issue – mentioned by even more interviewees than individualized support – is disappointment at the low level of difficulty in bridge-year courses. Many participants felt that they were not learning anything beyond lower secondary school level. Erika describes this in the following quotation.

Erika: At the end, in the whole bridge-year course you just repeat what you have already learned in lower secondary school. I learned few really NEW things. [...] I wished we had learned MORE. In the end I must admit the level is really low.

In the quotation Erika describes the repetition and low level of traditional subjects such

as languages or maths. She sees how the level of several subjects seems not to go beyond that of her former lower secondary school.⁵ This was confirmed by eight other participants and was also the subject of an open question in the quantitative questionnaire.

More workplace-related training in bridge-year courses

Regarding the following optimization segment, it should be noted that all the interviewees afterwards started VET. Several interviewees consider a more workplace-related curriculum, as a preparation for VET, a possible optimization.

Loran: I would like to have it like this: students should each day be provided with an insider view of the profession they want to learn. So, if one wants to be a computer scientist, one learns PROGRAMMING [...].

Loran believes a bridge-year course curriculum should be organized as a hands-on preparation for VET. This highlights, on the one hand, the wish for a more individual-oriented curriculum. On the other hand, the quotation shows that VET is seen as the connecting solution for bridge-year courses.

Discussion

Vocational orientation in this article is understood as an active constructive process (agency) which at the same time is bounded by biographic and situational chances (Evans 2002). Career guidance provided at school and by bridge-year courses is seen as an important support system, accessible to all participants.

⁵ It must not be forgotten that these levels differ among lower secondary schools in Switzerland.

The main findings of the empirical reflections, based on quantitative and qualitative data of participants doing bridge-year courses, can be summarized as follows:

- Connecting to the theoretical model by Meyer (2003), the empirical data attribute the greatest relevance to the orientation and systemic buffer functions. Less important from the learner's point of view seems to be the compensation function, for which a low degree of approval is reported. This finding is supported by qualitative data, where the main challenges in a young adult's vocational orientation were summarized as a lack of vocational maturity, lack of orientation and lack of information.
- As the vocational orientation process is based on support by diverse actors and offers, we have taken a closer look at institutional actors at lower secondary school and on bridge-year courses. Qualitative and quantitative data indicate differences in the perception of this support, as actors at lower secondary school were perceived as being less effective in vocational orientation than those involved in bridge-year courses. According to the qualitative data, as reasons for this we identify a mismatch of the knowledge of teachers, who represent participants in general education pathways compared to young people with an interest in VET pathways.

To answer the research question on how young adults perceive career guidance at lower secondary school and in bridge-year courses, we identify the orientation function as being even more important for young adults with comparatively few social resources. And even though differences between career guidance at lower secondary school and in bridge-year courses have been analysed, for both institutions more

individualized support is a major issue for learners. This desire for more individualized support can be interpreted in the light of bounded agency theory (Evans 2002) in such a way that participation in decision-making requires an informed individual. In the eyes of the interviewees, career opportunities differ according to life experience and situation. At the same time, under the conditions of individual support, decisions are certainly experienced as self-directed. Career guidance can be seen as an important future investment for young people to become actors in their vocational orientation.

As discussed above, career guidance in lower secondary school should reflect the social integration and selective function (Fend 2012). Career guidance is then seen as a tool to support individual vocational orientation, but also to reproduce the social structures of society. Against the background the findings show that young adults who attended a transitional option perceived teachers at lower secondary school as being of little help. Furthermore, according to the qualitative data, a lack of understanding of the situation and of empathy by the teachers is claimed, which learners explain by different educational choices of teachers and learners. So, according to participants in bridge-year courses, there is a clash between advisers who followed a general education route and those who took a VET route. As teachers are usually representatives of the former group, their counselling for career options in VET was perceived as limited. This lack of work experience outside education as a problem for an individual-centred career guidance has already been highlighted in further comparative studies in Europe (see Canning, Berger, and Pilz 2012). Based on these findings, teacher education and cooperation with training companies could be reconsidered for lower secondary school. For career guidance in bridge-year courses, the importance of the orientation function (Meyer 2003) was highlighted by the qualitative and quantitative data. While the data indicate the already high quality of career guidance in bridge-year courses, the

interviews still show a need for more individualized support.

Further optimization segments for bridge-year courses relate to the compensation function. This is in line with the analysis by Sacchi and Meyer (2016), who pointed out the low importance of the compensation function in the daily curriculum, which contrasts with the high importance attributed to it in political discourse. The qualitative data allow a closer look at this issue. In the opinion of the participants, further progress could be made by enhancing the level of difficulty of general subjects. The interviewees thought general subjects in bridge-year courses were at a low level. A challenging level of learning is suggested by international research, which points out how important it is to provide sufficient learning opportunities (e.g., Lee 2010), and motivational theory (Deci and Ryan 2008), which points out the importance of feeling competent.

Participants also speak out in favour of a more workplace-oriented training. For most of the participants in bridge-year courses, vocational orientation will lead them into VET, and the interviewees see the chance to prepare for this by having more profession-related subjects. At the same time a workplace-oriented curriculum means vocational orientation is limited and structured in advance, excluding general education routes, and therefore narrows the scope of follow-up solutions.

Limitations

The interpretation range of the findings is limited by the focus on young people who attended a bridge-year course. This is a selection of learners who were particularly at risk in their vocational orientation. It is therefore possible that other learners perceive career guidance by teachers at lower secondary school differently. This limitation was deliberately accepted, as the aim was to give vulnerable groups a voice, groups which

are rarely represented in reform processes. On the other hand, at 13% the response rate of the three cohorts was rather low. This may be because the contact information was out of date. Therefore the rate could not have been increased, not even by an expensive follow-up.

As is often the case with qualitative data, we cannot generalize about the results statistically, only theoretically. The interpretation should therefore be read as context-specific.

Conclusion

As vocational orientation is perceived as an active, constructive and ongoing process (Evans 2002; Müller 2009), learners should be given a voice when a curriculum of career guidance is being considered. In this paper we have given a learner-centred view of how young people with a non-linear pathway after compulsory school perceived support in their vocational orientation by actors of lower secondary school and bridge-year courses. Based on a theoretical reflection on the functions of compulsory school (Fend 2012) and bridge-year courses (Meyer 2003), optimization segments were discussed by learners.

On the whole, a curriculum of career guidance for lower secondary school should be more individualized, starting with an exploring phase to reduce the risk of routes being preselected by addressing students as members of their respective social classes. As we can assume from the data, special attention should be given to teacher education and further education. The aim should be to extend their knowledge of possible vocational pathways and to make teachers more aware of other career paths besides their own.

For bridge-year courses, the data indicate the importance of fostering an already individualized process without neglecting the compensatory function of the curricula. So, while career guidance should be the focus of attention at lower secondary school level, it should also be an important, but not the only, objective of bridge-year courses. Bearing in mind the coming reform of the curriculum of career guidance, further research should focus on how these needs can be met in the future.

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