Full Paper Template

Guidance on career development in vocational education in the Netherlands.

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1   ABSTRACT

This paper explores which learning environments – geared towards career learning in students – contribute to the acquisition of career competencies in students attending pre-vocational, secondary and higher vocational education. The learning environment is laid out into the organization of the curriculum and career guidance. The study makes a distinction between three career competencies: career reflection, career forming and networking. Two quantitative studies (8325 students and 537 teachers in total) in pre-vocational, secondary and higher vocational education took place in order to study the relationship between aspects of the learning environment and career competencies. A case study in secondary vocational education provides a description of what happens in conversations between the student, the teacher and a mentor from placement. Conversations are observed and analysed from a career learning perspective for formal characteristics, content, form, and relational components. The results show that career-directed guidance at school and on the job – including a dialogue with the student about concrete experiences that are focused on the future – contributes most to career competencies in students. Also a learning environment which is practice based and in which students have the opportunity to have a say in what and how they learn, contributes to career development of students.

2   INTRODUCTION

At the core of education lies an important, inherently pedagogic task, perhaps best put forward in Seneca's "non scolae sed vitae discimus" (it's not for school but for life that we learn). Our modern, rapidly changing knowledge society (Meijers, 1995; Kuijpers, Meijers & Winters, 2009) poses new challenges to life, and to working life in particular: employees feel pressured to be flexible and show high 'employability' (Thijssen, 1998) as they are faced with unpredictable career paths that go beyond the scope of a job or organisation (Arthur, 1994; Defillipi & Arthur, 1994). To prepare students for these employee challenges, we believe that:

(1)   students will have to (learn to) take responsibility for directing their own careers (Giddens, 1991; Savickas, 2001; Meijers & Wardekker, 2002; Kuijpers & Scheerens, 2006);

(2)   education must rise above its role as (mere) training centre where knowledge and skills are transferred, and become a 'career centre' aimed at guiding students in their – study and professional – career development (Geurts, 2007).

Enabling students to gradually take responsibility for directing their career and thus be (more) self-directing, requires that they learn specific competences (Blustein, 1992; Dawis, 1996; Savickas, 2001) – we call them career competencies here (Kuijpers, 2006a,b) – that steer the development of a person's career in a particular direction. Kuijpers (2003) has developed an instrument to measure career competencies in employees, which was used – with small adaptations – in the survey concerning students in Dutch pre-vocational and secondary vocational education. The following competencies were demonstrated (Kuijpers, Meijers & Bakker, 2006):

- o career reflection: reflective behaviour based on experiences and choices to reveal qualities and motives that are important for the future;

- o career forming: proactive behaviour that influences the course of one's career by researching jobs, making deliberate decisions and taking action to make sure jobs and study match with one's personal qualities and motives;

- o networking: interactive behaviour to build and maintain contacts on the internal and external job market, aimed at career development.

But how can these career competencies be acquired and developed? In the following paragraphs, we will describe the results of two quantitative studies (in pre-vocational, secondary vocational and higher vocational education) based on questionnaires and one qualitative study (in secondary vocational education) which analyses what happens in vocational training conversations between the student and his/her mentors from school and placement.

3   THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, IN SURVEY

The first study reported in this paper is a survey among students in (pre)vocational (n=3505, in 2006) and higher (n=4820, in 2008) vocational education. The aim is to highlight the aspects of the learning environment related to the development of career competencies in students, taking into account personal and situation-bound factors (illustrated in figure 1 below).
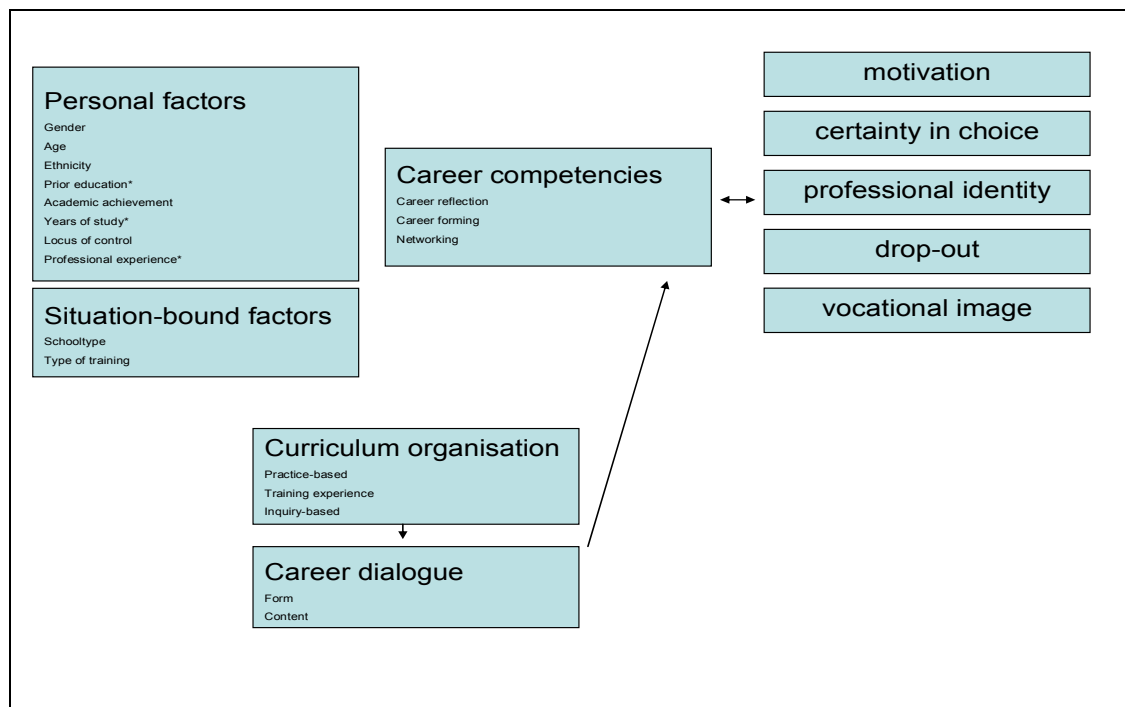

Figure 1. Research model, with * indicating factors only included in the 2008 study.

The instrument, a self-evaluation questionnaire, was disseminated among student from multiple educational settings (over 45 schools, randomly selected) across the Netherlands. Data were analysed using multi -level analysis and regression analyses.

Our research findings suggest that a career-oriented learning environment is only achieved when students get a chance to reflect on relevant work experiences and when they are guided to make choices that are important for their future. As for this last factor, results show that many individual discussions with students are held by teachers and guidance counsellors. These conversations only contribute to the development of student career competencies when they take place in the form of a dialogue, in which the students learn to give direction to their own careers.

Instruments like the PDP and the portfolio are rarely used and when they are, they are used to successfully complete the program of study, but not as an instrument to conduct a dialogue about careers (see also Mittendorff et al., 2008). Both in prevocational, secondary vocational and higher vocational education students report that little guidance is given about making choices (what, why, where, how and with whom to learn) to achieve satisfying study and career choices.

The research question whether the learning environment contributes to the presence of career competencies is answered affirmatively in both studies in vocational education. Even when personal and situation-bound factors are taken into consideration, the characteristics of the learning environment significantly influence the development of students' career competencies. In particular career dialogues in school and in practice (the workplace during placement) prove to be crucial: both contribute to career reflection, career forming and networking and do this more strongly than personal factors.

In groups in which a career method or PDP is used, students report that they reflect more on their careers. Also in groups in which students at risk to drop out are talked to, reflection is more common. However, this doesn't mean that these students are able to give more direction to their careers (career forming). The more traditional forms of career guidance, such as discussions with the school counsellor and career choice tests, do not correlate with career competencies.

In other words, in order to encourage students to become self-directed, it is to be recommended that those guiding students at school and in the workplace help students to discover their own capabilities and motivation. Students must learn to make their own choices about what they want to learn and be able to articulate why they want to learn it. They should be encouraged and guided to engage in activities that help them achieve their learning goals. Concrete experiences in the workplace and assignments in school are powerful starting points to get students to reflect and orient themselves with regard to their future. The dialogue, with an active role for the student as well, is crucial for the development of career competencies.

A strong career oriented learning environment not only requires that the student is given the chance to participate in the dialogue, but also that the learning environment is practice- and inquiry-based. By practice-based, we mean that the student gets a chance to experience many and varied real-life activities. This has a proven effect in our studies on competencies career forming and networking. We use inquiry-based to express the active role of the student in his/her learning process, as opposed to supply-based education. But! Organizing practice-based and inquiry-based education is not enough to convince students to demonstrate career competencies. In order to acquire career competencies, it seems that the curriculum should not primarily focus on the use of certain methods and techniques, but on the creation of a career dialogue in school and practice.

So the important conditions to organizing a career learning environment are:

    (1) practice-based

(2) inquiry-based

(3) dialogical

Table 1 summarizes the results (scale 1 to 4) from both quantitative studies mentioned above, for students in pre-vocational, secondary vocational and higher vocational education.

Table 1. Summary of questionnaire studies.

	Pre-vocational and secondary vocational E	Higher vocational E
Learning environment		
°practice-based	2,7	2,61
°inquiry-based	2,3	2,39
°dialogical	2,4	2,58
Career competencies		
°career reflection	2,7	2,57
°career forming: work exploration	2,4	2,43
°career forming: career steering		2,25
°networking	2,4	2,38

These results show that in the schools (random selection of Dutch schools) the critical factors for a career learning environment are hardly present. According to the students the learning environment is only to a small extend practice-based (and that is a surprising result for vocational education) and not inquiry-based and dialogical. Therefore, it is not surprising that students hardly develop career competencies.

4 CAREER DIALOGUE, IN VIDEO-ANALYSIS

In this section we present de results of an exploratory study as to what happens in the conversations between students, teachers and mentors from placement within Dutch secondary vocational education. This study is part of an ongoing research and development project called 'career learning in competence-based education', initiated by The Hague University as a response to the research results presented above concerning career learning environments. The broad aim of the project is to map (research component) and stimulate (development component) the communication between the student and his/her teacher and mentor from placement.

In 2007-2008 the project group finished a baseline measurement for career guidance at the school. Among the methods to map career orientation and guidance was the analysis of actual conversations (n=24, all from one specific school for secondary vocational education in the Netherlands) between students, teachers and mentors from placement. We analysed the conversations based on a theoretical framework, and answered the following questions:

(1) Who is talking and for how long? (formal characteristics)

(2) What are they talking about? (content)

(3) How much time is spent on informative, affective, reflective and/or activating components? (form characteristics)

(4) Is there a conversation with, against or about the student? (relationship)

Formal characteristics

Table 2 illustrates that the student and the mentor from practice talk relatively little (21% and 24% respectively), especially when compared to the proportion of time the teacher is talking (53%, so more than half of the conversation on average). Looking more at the content – not who is talking, but who is asking the questions and deciding the theme – the difference in proportions becomes more extreme: some 57% of what is said answers to the agenda of teachers/school, while the input of mentors from placement and students remains limited to 11% and 5% respectively (for 27% of conversation time, there's no clear input from one of the three parties).

Table 2. Overview of conversation time and who's talking.

|	*Student*	*Teacher*	*Mentor from placement*	*Total*
Sum for 24 conversations	2u 38m 23s	6u 07m 33s	3u 10m 52s	12u 10m 52s
Mean per conversation (time)	6m 36s	15m 19s	7m 57s	30m 27s
Mean per conversation (percent)	21%	53%	24%	
Weighed mean for different departments (time)	6m 47s	16m 02s	8m 04s	31m 23s
Weighed mean for different departments (percent)	21%	53%	24%	

Content

The most important question, given the exploratory nature of our study, was what the conversation is actually about. Table 3 (section a) shows clearly that the largest amount of time in these conversations (40%) goes to matters that don't fit our presupposed categories of content ('other'). This turns out to be mainly administration, e.g. discussing an instrument for vocational training and filling out forms where – what they call - competences[1] are assessed. This doesn't inspire a substantive conversation and is therefore mentioned separately.

When the conversation does discuss contents, it is mainly (32% of total time) about the student's study trajectory. More specifically (section b) most of the time goes to the assessment of learning goals, often put forward by the school using competence-checklists (53% of time). This is mainly summative (41%) and only little formative (12%) evaluation. By comparison, the time spent on asking students about their training in practice (33%, of which 25% in general) or in school (14%, of which 9% in general) is more limited.

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[1] The notion competence is used here for learning goals posed by the school.

Table 3. Subjects in conversations, by theme.

(a) (b) (c) (d)
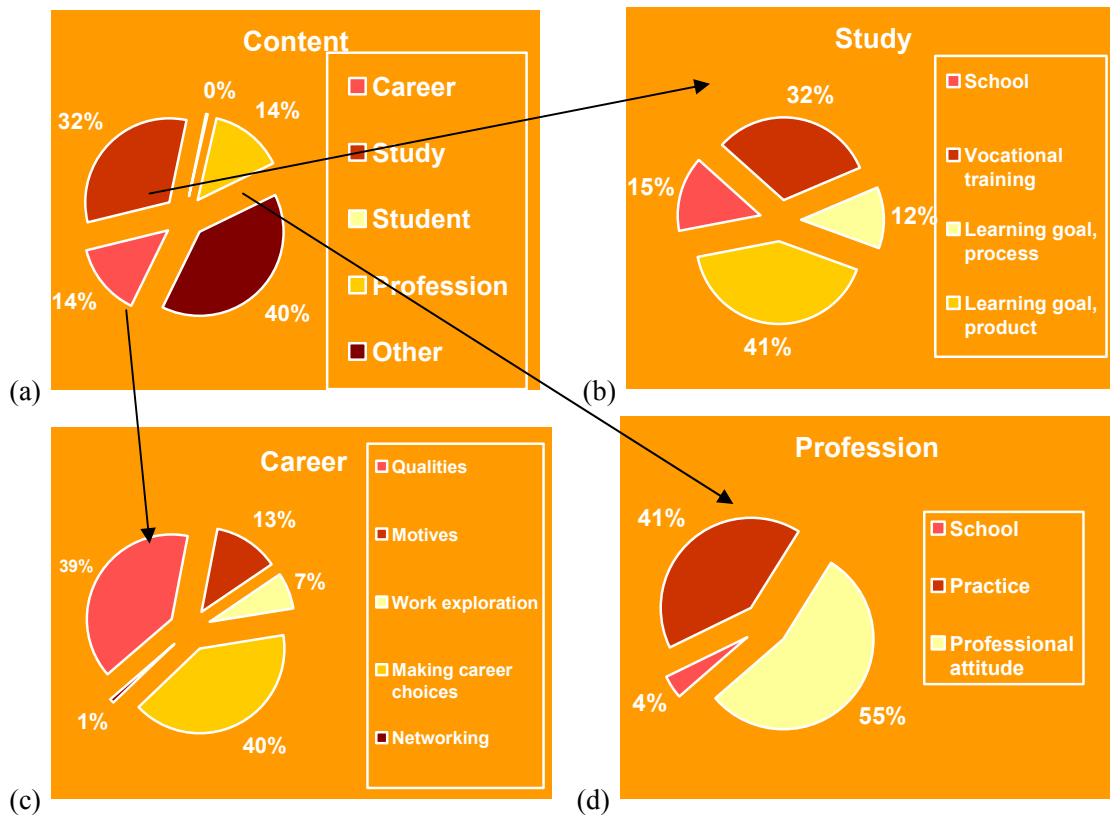
The student's personal life and hobbies are hardly ever the subject of bpv-conversations (0%, section a). During informal moments before and after the actual conversation this might be mentioned (as witnessed by the researcher), but this information seems to be of no importance to teachers and mentors in placement during the formal conversation.

The remaining time is divided among the categories of career and profession (14% each, section a). In the trialogue hardly any (4%, section d) evolution in vocational education and training is discussed, more often (41%) generalities about the practice and mostly (55%) expectations on the professional attitude of students in the workplace and future employees are mentioned.

Of the five career competences discussed by Kuijpers (2003), it's mainly reflection on qualities and making career decisions that are discussed (39% and 40% respectively, section c). This means a – superficial – evaluation of the skills the student does or doesn't have and what the next step to take might be. If the conversation about the career continues at all, either the motives of the student are discussed (13%) or what work looks like in a particular sector of employment (work exploration, 7%). Only rarely is the conversation about contacts that are important in getting started in a certain profession (networking, 1%).

Form

Besides the content of training conversations, we have also studied their form. More specifically it's about the portions of time spent on giving relevant information to the student (informative),

showing – positive or negative – appreciation (affective) and stimulating reflection (reflective) and action (activating). Table 4 shows these proportions for the different departments.

Table 4. Proportion of time spent on various form components (per department).

	Informative	Affective	Reflective	Activating
Economy	16%	24%	10%	7%
Health care	27%	11%	14%	10%
ICT	8%	18%	2%	1%
Technique	13%	45%	3%	3%
TOTAL	16%	26%	8%	6%

The component that gets the most time in training conversations, is the affective component. On average 26% of the time goes to the appreciation of students (and their competences); often this is related to learning goals. The informative component also gets an important part (16%) of conversation time. Both of these components combined form a more help-oriented approach to student guidance. The other components combine to form a more career-oriented approach. The analysis of these 24 conversations shows a relatively marginal position for the reflective and activating component (8% and 6% respectively). Students get their mentors' advice in these conversations in the form of an (expert) opinion, but the step to growth in the students is not made explicitly. The conversation goes further without an invitation to reflect upon this message or to take action. This implies that the potential of the conversation as formative evaluation gets lost in translation (see content).

Relationship

The analysis of training conversations has shown that mentors (in school and placement) communicate mostly *against* (65%) and *about* (21%) students, and hardly *with* (9%) them. In a qualitative description of a typical training conversation, the student is not portrayed as an equal partner in conversation. He/she seems trapped between two professional opinions and responds by either remaining passive or (merely) reacting to what is being said. Since the student has little opportunity to offer a personal opinion, that opinion cannot be picked up in the conversation.

5   DISCUSSION

The results of the quantitative studies made it clear that education as career centre, aimed at guiding students in their career (competencies) development, requires the combination of problem-based and inquiry-based methods in a dialogical context in the learning environment (Meijers, Kuijpers & Bakker, 2006). In problem-based education real-life problems are the starting point for learning and learning assignments (Bailey, Hughes & Moore, 2004; Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989). Mott et al. (1999) and Cohen-Scali (2003) illustrate how real-life experiences in a professional setting have a beneficial influence on the development of career competences. In inquiry-based education students are allowed to have an active role (participation) and control over their own learning process (Boekaerts & Simons, 1993; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Simons, Linden & Duffy, 2000; Bruijn, 2006). Weick and Berlinger (1989) and Voncken and Breemer (2008) illustrate the beneficial influence on students' self-directedness in the career.

But most important proved to be the dialogical context. The career dialogue is a conversation between the student and his/her mentor about the meaning of things the student experiences in real-life assignments in the school and in practice, and about the impact on the student's life and his/her professional career (Meijers & Kuijpers, 2007). The aim of the conversation is to make connections between relevant experiences for the student from the professional world on the one hand, and the developing self and professional 'identity' on the other. Meijers, Kuijpers and Bakker (2006) illustrate that a career dialogue in school and practice contributes to the formation of career competencies and their use in actual choice-making and learning experiences. But how is student guidance organized in reality?

Training conversations have the potential to live up to the three conditions of stimulating learning environments for career learning. The results of the qualitative study show however that this potential is hardly utilised. Training conversations discuss the most successful way to a degree and not necessarily to a career in practice. It was shown that students have a marginal role in the conversation, while teachers (school's agenda) dominate. While career learning is addressed in the conversations, the traditional culture in schools prevents the conversations from being stimulating. This first exploration of what actually happens in training conversations (as a prototype of student guidance) aims to be an eye-opener regarding the challenges to coaching and mentoring in modern education. The ambition of our broad project 'career learning in competence-based education' is not only to define what works (knowledge creation), but to actually try out, evaluate and redefine initiatives for 'good practice'.

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