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Exploring Finnish Guidance Counselors' Conceptions of Career Management Skills

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Abstract

This article reports the findings from a phenomenographic investigation into guidance counselors' conceptions of career management skills (CMS). The results show that CMS was conceived as (a) information-based knowledge, (b) personal skills development, (c) interpersonal skills development, and (d) autonomous application of skills. The differences appeared along six dimensions of variation that included awareness of CMS, emphasis, promotion of CMS, teaching practice, assessment, and attitude. The findings give us a more profound understanding of critical aspects that may have an important role in the development of individual's CMS.

In recent decades, terms like *work* and *career* have undergone significant changes in meaning (e.g., Blustein, 2006; Collin, 2000; Herr, 2008; W. Patton & McMahon, 2015), reflecting economic, technological, and social changes that have increased the dynamism and complexity of the contemporary labor market (e.g., Cedefop, 2016; Weil, 2014). With rapid and ongoing change in occupational profiles and work methods (e.g., Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Frey & Osborne, 2017), career pathways have become more diverse and involve more transitions. Non-standard forms of employment such as temporary and short-term work, agency work, and self-employment have become increasingly common (e.g., Dølvik & Steen, 2018; Eurofound, 2017; International Labour Organisation, 2016), and beyond just finding a job, individuals must equip themselves with the requisite skills for lifetime employability (Barnes et al., 2020). Collectively referred to as career management skills (CMS) (e.g., European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network [ELGPN], 2012; Jarvis, 2003; Neary et al., 2015), these are considered crucial for effective management of nonlinear career pathways and increased employability, in turn promoting social equity and inclusion (Barnes et al., 2020; Vuorinen, 2012).

In its 2010 report on Education and Training, the European Commission urged member states to prioritize lifelong CMS acquisition as a key career guidance objective for schools and to support teachers in developing CMS programs (Council of the European Union, 2004, 2008). A recent recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (2018) also made explicit reference to acquisition of lifelong CMS. However, there is evidence that the potential for developing student CMS remains largely unrealized. Previous studies (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development [OECD], 2003; Sweet et al., 2009) have highlighted how career education programs for students who are about to leave school tend to focus on individual assistance regarding educational choices rather than on learning activities that develop CMS (e.g., OECD, 2003; Thomsen, 2014). Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) data, for example, indicate high rates of participation in guidance activities among students in both Denmark and Finland. However, while Finnish students develop a perspective on higher education and the labor market, Danish students tend to focus primarily on their secondary education options (Sweet et al., 2014). Musset and Kurekova (2018) contended that to ensure holistic development of students' CMS, guidance professionals should collaborate with other stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and external providers. If CMS development is considered important, the associated language and concepts must be properly understood, but recent research suggests that the term "career management skills" is not self-evident or universally understood among those who must implement the relevant frameworks (Neary et al., 2015). A formal development framework and appropriately qualified practitioners are important for CMS program implementation (Sultana, 2012). To that end, a fuller understanding is needed of guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS. Phenomenographic studies have previously confirmed

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the association between conceptions and practices among teachers (e.g., Koballa et al., 2000; Trigwell et al., 1999) and career practitioners (e.g., Kettunen, 2017; Kettunen et al., 2013). This study contributes to the extending research by identifying guidance counselors' different ways of conceptualizing CMS and the key features that differentiated those conceptions. The results may support and provide an impetus for development of pre-service and in-service training of career guidance counselors.

CMS

The term *career management skills* or CMS refers broadly to the aggregation of personal characteristics and abilities that enables an individual to "plan and pursue life, learning and work opportunities" (Skills Development Scotland [SDS], 2012, p. 1). The concept is grounded in theories of social learning and career learning, both of which emphasize the need for career development practices to look beyond decision making to the acquisition of career development as a learning process where the knowledge, skills, and competences on managing career have been acquired (e.g., Krumboltz, 1994; Law, 1996). According to the ELGPN (2015a), "Career management skills (CMS) are competencies that help individuals to identify their existing skills, develop career learning goals and take action to enhance their careers." As highlighted in various reviews and policy documents (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2004, 2008, 2018; ELGPN, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; OECD, 2003, 2018), mastery of these skills is increasingly important (e.g., Jarvis, 2003; Sultana, 2012). According to the Council of the European Union (2018),

> Career management forms part of the individual's personal, social and learning competences, which includes knowledge of one's capacities and interests and self-evaluation, planning and social skills, as well as engagement with learning, the capacity to analyse information about learning and work opportunities in relation to self-knowledge and the capacity to make career decisions and successful transitions.

In the broadest sense, this means setting realistic and personally meaningful career goals; articulating and acting on lifelong learning opportunities and strategic work decisions that support career goals; assessing work–life balance; and acknowledging the relationship between work, society, and the economy (Bridgstock, 2009).

Development of CMS

In the drive to integrate CMS into school curricula, several countries have developed frameworks that structure and specify these skills (e.g., Haché et al., 2006; The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010; National Career Development Association, 2007; SDS, 2012). The goal of these frameworks is to broaden understanding of career guidance beyond education and career options, emphasizing a learning perspective that promotes and establishes appropriate conditions for the acquisition of CMS. Existing CMS classifications vary around a common core according to national and regional curricula. One well-known theoretical framework for CMS learning is the so-called DOTS model (Law, 1996; Law & Watts, 1977), which specifies the process and content of learning competences that support (a) decision making, (b) opportunity awareness, (c) transition skills, and (d) self-awareness. In practice, the delivered sequence is often more accurately captured by the acronym SODT. *Self-awareness* refers to the individual's self-knowledge and understanding in career-relevant terms; *opportunity awareness* refers to one's knowledge of work opportunities and demands; *decision making* refers to the skills required to make realistic choices regarding education, training, and work opportunities; and *transition skills* refers to the ability and knowledge required to move from one career phase to the next (Law & Watts, 1977; Watts & Hawthorn, 1992). Law (1999, 2001) revised the DOTS model to incorporate the learning dimensions of *sensing, sifting, focusing*, and *understanding*, which can be used to analyze how specific guidance activities support the development of different competences. According to Sultana (2012), most CMS-related programs taught in schools and public employment services (PES) contexts across Europe are informed by the DOTS framework. Neary et al. (2015) reported that among guidance practitioners, trainers, managers, teachers, and lecturers, conceptions of CMS resemble those described in the DOTS framework (Law & Watts, 1977).

Although several countries have sought to incorporate CMS elements in career education programs for adults and younger people, Sultana (2013) argued that only a few of these have developed appropriate strategies for assessing CMS learning. The choice of assessment strategy presents specific challenges in that it must address both processes and outcomes, because career learning in formal education settings is often diffuse rather than a standalone "subject" (A. Barnes, 2009; Sultana, 2012, 2013). The inadequacy of CMS assessment is therefore a significant issue, not least because by implying that this is not an important area of learning, it undermines motivation among program providers and learners alike (Sultana, 2013).

As noted above, in-school CMS development varies internationally. In some countries, these skills are taught as a separate subject while in others CMS is offered as an option for particular age groups. Standalone CMS courses are usually offered at higher educational levels (Sultana, 2012). In Finland, career education is a compulsory element in the curriculum from comprehensive education to further education. While all staff members are involved, school counselors have primary responsibility for career education delivery. School counselors' qualifications and competences are closely regulated, requiring either a master's degree in

school counseling or a 60 ECTS postgraduate diploma (Valtioneuvoston asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista 986/1998). As Finnish education is highly decentralized, schools and teachers have autonomy in planning and implementing career education in the classrooms. Although the overall structure and objectives are well defined in the national core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016a, 2016b), implementation is not specified in detail. It follows that CMS activities tend to reflect teachers' own conceptions of career education and CMS acquisition, including their understanding of the changing world of work. This study seeks to clarify Finnish guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS in order to bridge this gap in the existing research.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the study is to discover and describe the qualitatively different ways in which guidance counselors conceptualize the CMS. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are Finnish guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS? and (b) What are the critical aspects that differentiate qualitatively varying ways of understanding the CMS?

Method

This research employed phenomenographic approach (Åkerlind, 2012; Bowden, 2000a; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018, Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997) to examine Finnish guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS. Phenomenography focuses on the variation in participants' conceptions or ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon at the collective level (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997; Marton & Pong, 2005). As well as identifying the different understandings, a phenomenographic study seeks to identify the aspects that critically differentiate the categories from each other, hence revealing their qualitative differences. Marton and Booth (1997) specified three criteria of quality that these categories of description should meet: (a) each category should describe something distinct about the conception, (b) the relationships between categories should be logical and clearly represented, and (c) the categories should be limited in number and parsimonious. The process employed to meet these criteria of quality is reported in the data analysis section.

The research questions are addressed from a second-order perspective, in which individual accounts inform the researcher's description of different conceptions of the target phenomenon (Marton, 1981, 1994). In phenomenographic analysis, terms like *conception, experience, apprehension*, and *way of understanding* are used interchangeably (Marton & Booth, 1997), as are verbs like *experience, perceive, conceive, conceptualize*, and *understand* (Bamwesiga et al., 2013). These terms are used in an experiential rather than a psychological or cognitive sense (Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenography assumes that the varying relationships formed by different individuals are internally and logically related as they are connected by the same phenomenon (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton, 2000). In the context of career services, previous phenomenographic studies have examined such issues as career practitioners' conceptions of social media (Kettunen et al., 2013), ethical practice in social networking (Kettunen & Makela, 2019), leadership and management in guidance and counseling networks (Nykänen, 2011), the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in relation to national guidance policies (Kettunen et al., 2016), and the challenges of implementing ICT in career services (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019).

Participants and Study Context

The study participants were Finnish guidance counselors (*n* = 16; 15 female, 1 male), ranging in age from 38 to 63 years (including two aged 30–39 years, five aged 40–49 years, four aged 50–59 years, and five aged 60 or older). Levels of career guidance experience ranged from 5 to 27 years (four with less than 10 years experience, seven with 10–20 years, and five with more than 20 years). In line with phenomenographic principles (Green, 2005; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018), diverse participants were deliberately recruited to maximize variation in understandings of the target phenomenon (Åkerlind et al., 2005)—in this case, CMS. Email invitations were sent to every practicing guidance counselor in Central Finland, and participants were also recruited by means of social network advertisements on Facebook (national group of guidance counselors). To ensure relevant and information-rich data, purposive sampling (M. Q. Patton, 2002) was used to select and identify recruits with firsthand experience of CMS. Previous phenomenographic studies indicate that a sample of 10 to 15 subjects is usually sufficient to ensure maximum variation (Åkerlind, 2008; Trigwell, 2000) and a manageable volume of data. The final sample included guidance counselors from urban and rural comprehensive, upper secondary, and vocational schools. All had a master's degree and met Finnish national certification requirements.

Data Collection

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Although phenomenographic data can be acquired by other means, the interview is the most common method (e.g., Åkerlind, 2005; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018; Marton & Booth, 1997). Individual interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace, with the exception of two at the university. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min; the open-ended questions allowed the interviewee to articulate their current understanding and experience as fully and flexible as

possible. Prior to the interviews, the questions were pilot tested to ensure they would yield the necessary information and data to meet the research objectives (e.g., Bowden, 2005; Green, 2005).

The interview questions were designed to direct the interviewee's attention to the target phenomenon and included the following: *How do you understand the term 'CMS'? How does the national core curriculum describe CMS? How do guidance practitioners build competence in teaching CMS? Could you describe how CMS are taught? How are CMS assessed or evaluated?* Adopting an informal and conversational approach, the researcher played the role of active listener, remaining as open as possible to the range of experiences that emerged (Limberg, 2008). Phenomenographers should not introduce new ideas that are not mentioned by the interviewee or make any judgmental or leading comments (Bowden, 2005; Green, 2005). Neutral follow-up questions were asked for clarification in order to fully understand the interviewee's conception of the target phenomenon. Digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis, yielding 75 pages of verbatim text (A4, single spaced).

Data Analysis

To begin, researchers read the entire transcript a few times to familiarize themselves with the data, and a number of common initial themes emerged. Themes were separated according to the varying meanings expressed, and researchers then re-read the data several times to ensure that meanings had not been taken out of their original context. Using different thematic lenses, the researchers then explored each theme in turn to identify relationships, and the transcript was re-read multiple times in its entirety. Phenomenographic analysis is highly iterative, requiring researchers to revisit the transcript repeatedly to ensure that the developed categories remain faithful to the transcript (Åkerlind, 2005, 2012; Bowden & Green, 2005).

The second phase of the analysis focused on structure—that is, relations between the categories of description that emerged from the previous step (Bowden, 2005; Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2018). Critical aspects—themes that consistently occurred across all categories representing differences between various ways of understanding CMS—were identified and used to structure the logical relationships both within and among the categories (Åkerlind, 2005). The aim was to distinguish between more and less complex views of CMS (Åkerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997) and to broaden awareness of its different aspects. Led by two experienced researchers in the field of career guidance, group analysis helped to ensure the rigor and to exclude researcher bias (Bowden, 2005). During this process, critical feedback and questioning helped to strengthen the impartiality and robustness of the analysis. The data were repeatedly revisited, and after several modifications, the final logical, structural hierarchy was established.

To ensure analytical robustness, the data were individually analyzed by the first and second authors. Initial results then were compared, discussed, and finally agreed following some negotiation regarding interpretation. This discussion and revision of the categories and their structure served to validate the interpretation of the data. Research colleagues acted as critical friends, probing key aspects of candidate categories and seeking justifications for a given formulation from within the transcript. Iterative re-reading and re-drafting continued to the point of saturation—that is, until re-reading failed to produce any significant change in the categories of description (Bowden & Green, 2010). As Bowden (2000b) emphasized, the group process makes it less likely that analysis will cease prematurely.

The final phase of analysis focused on ensuring that the categories of description met Marton and Booth's (1997) criteria for assessing the quality of a phenomenographic outcome space (that each category must reveal something distinctive about ways of understanding the phenomenon; that categories must be logically related and hierarchically represented; and that the data must be represented as parsimoniously as possible).

Results

The analysis of the data revealed four distinct categories of description reflecting Finnish guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS (Table 1). CMS were conceived of as (a) information-based knowledge, (b) personal skills development, (c) interpersonal skills development, and (d) autonomous application of skills. The categories were nested in hierarchies extending from the least complex understanding to the most complex. Aspects of the phenomenon that differentiate the categories are called *dimensions of variation*, which are critical for a more sophisticated or complete level of understanding. In the present case, there were six dimensions of variation: *awareness of CMS, emphasis, promotion of CMS, teaching practice, assessment*, and *attitude*.

The following section elaborates on each category, using direct quotes from the participants to illustrate key aspects. It is important to note that this categorization represents collective rather than individual conceptions of CMS.

Description of the Categories

Category 1: CMS as information-based knowledge. In the first category, in which CMS is conceived of as information-based knowledge, guidance counselors were relatively *unfamiliar* with the concept of CMS. They characterized it as a difficult concept and seemed unaware of how it is described in the national core curriculum. This category emphasizes the skills and competencies that enable people to investigate *opportunities* for learning and work, and knowledge of where and how to access reliable career information and to use it effectively:

Table 1. Finnish Guidance Counselors' Conceptions of Career Management Skills (CMS).

Dimensions of variation	Categories			
	Information-based knowledge	Personal skills development	Interpersonal skills development	Autonomous application of skills
Awareness of CMS	Unfamiliar	Vague	Good	Comprehensive
Emphasis	Opportunity awareness	Self-knowledge	Decision making	Transition learning
Promotion of CMS	Guidance counselor	Individual teachers	Coordinated effort among teachers	Collaboration beyond school
Teaching practice	Experts provide information	Experts interact with students	Students collaborate	Students become active agents
Assessment	Not needed	Non-systematic	Needs improvement	Requires joint investment
Attitude	Skeptical	Hesitant	Positive	Committed

Note. CMS = career management skills.

I find it [CMS] really hard.

I don't think it [CMS] is very visible in our curriculum.

I think it's something to do with skills for finding information from different websites or books or visits, or whatever . . .

Here, promoting CMS was seen as *guidance counselors' responsibility*, and teaching is perceived as imparting or *providing information* to students. Guidance counselors, other teachers, and employers were seen as experts, whereas pupils were seen mainly as recipients of the knowledge provided. The role of these experts is to inform students about working life, the Finnish school system, and opportunities related to education, training, and work:

We [guidance counsellors] give them [students] the big picture regarding the Finnish education system.

You need information about working life, about jobs, about the possibilities for study in universities or other schools, as well as knowledge about the future . . .

Practitioners saw *no need for assessment* of CMS in this category, insisting that it is neither possible nor necessary to evaluate individual lives. Respondents expressed overall *skepticism* about CMS, arguing that students are too young and too removed from working life and that other school-related issues remain more important:

In our school, we don't believe in systematic evaluation of that [CMS]. How can you control somebody's life? . . . You cannot evaluate people's lives.

I don't think of [what I do with my students] as guidance counselling. The most important thing is to teach them how to plan their studies here.

Category 2: CMS as personal skills development. In this category, CMS is understood as personal skills development.

Participants expressed a *vague* understanding of CMS but only superficial knowledge of how the national curriculum addresses this topic. Emphasis was placed on people's beliefs and self-knowledge as well as their potential for *development*. On this view, *self-knowledge* was seen to relate to personality factors, including strengths, weaknesses, beliefs, interests, motives, and emotions:

I know our national curriculum includes phrases like "learning to find information." There's also a stronger emphasis on the work experience that students should gain during their time at school. Then there are ideas about getting to know yourself—thinking about your interests, your character and so on.

I think the most important thing is to know yourself—what you want from life, what you want to do with your life, what things you are good at and what are skills you want to learn more of or more professionally.

Here, responsibility for promoting CMS was seen to extend beyond the guidance counselor to each *individual teacher* within their own subject, as stated in the new curriculum. In this context, teaching was perceived as supporting active knowledge processing, in which *experts* (including guidance counselors, subject teachers, and employers) *interact with students*. Through guidance counseling lessons and individual and group discussions, guidance counselors support students to develop self-knowledge and reflection skills. Students are seen as active participants in the teaching and learning situation, with greater input to their own CMS learning:

So it is not only us [guidance counsellors] who do this [promoting of CMS]. It is something every teacher has to do. It's also in the curriculum, which puts more emphasis on CMS—that it is everybody's job, not just ours.

In my career counselling sessions, we move to a deeper level in terms of how well students know themselves, how well they can describe their strengths and weaknesses, their desires and

dreams . . . I think one of the career management skills is to know yourself.

Here, participants indicated that there is *no systematic way of evaluating* CMS. While they assess these skills in personal discussions, they do not record this information on the grounds that it is difficult to assess CMS and that there are no measures or guidelines for evaluation. They were generally *hesitant* about CMS in this regard, in part because they found the topic complicated and challenging:

Teachers are not forced to evaluate CMS. The evaluation system is not ready yet; it's not very well organized.

I find it [CMS] challenging in a changing world.

Category 3: CMS as interpersonal skills development. In this third category, guidance counselors exhibited *good* awareness of CMS and a detailed understanding of how the national core curriculum addresses this topic. Participants noted that CMS is handled better in the current curriculum than in the previous one. Here, emphasis was placed on *decision making*—that is, on the skills and competencies that enable young people to make and adjust plans, manage change and transitions, and take appropriate actions:

It's about knowing oneself, knowing about education and work life possibilities and being able to plan for the future and make decisions.

I think it's the skills they need when they choose . . . when they have to make decisions in their lives. That can be at school or when they are already working—or later in their life, if they have to change their occupation or career.

In this category, responsibility for promoting CMS was seen to shift from the individual teacher to a collective and *coordinated effort among teachers*, including guidance counselors. At the center of the teaching and learning process, *students* were encouraged to *collaborate* in group work projects like researching future working life or organizing business sales activities. The guidance counselors felt that this enabled students to gain confidence in their own ideas, to act on their own plans, to understand about entrepreneurship, and to learn proactively by doing:

We [teachers and guidance counsellors] initiate something in which several subject teachers become a team, teaching the same thing through their own subject to give students a broader understanding of some topic.

[With regard to a business sales activity in school] they find their own ideas for what they would like to do. They share ideas with their classmates; they form teams; and they start to work on their ideas.

In this category, participants noted that assessment of CMS *needs improvement*. They relied on observation and

surveys for this purpose but felt that evaluation generally lacked structure and needed further development. However, they also expressed a *positive* attitude and interest regarding CMS and emphasized the need to develop their own CMS teaching:

I should improve that side [CMS evaluation].

I think many of us [guidance counsellors] would like to learn more and become competent in relation to these questions [CMS].

Category 4: CMS as autonomous application of skills. Here, guidance counselors exhibited *comprehensive* awareness of CMS, which was understood in terms of transversal curriculum competences. The emphasis here was on *transitional learning*—in other words, skills and competencies that help students to gain a realistic sense of what to expect later in their career development and to acquire the necessary coping skills to make these transitions successfully. Participants understood that students must progress from the world of learning to the world of work and back again throughout their lifetime:

We have a new curriculum in Finland now that includes new transversal competences—how to think, how to acquire cultural and social knowledge, how to take care of oneself—things like that . . . we have to find the students' strengths and ways for them to go further in their life.

In any profession you aim for nowadays, you need to be able to adapt to many things and to be a good learner.

So that you can change your profession and cope with the changes and new situations that you encounter.

In this category, promotion of CMS extended to *collaboration beyond school*. Participants acknowledged the importance of mutually supportive partnerships with external organizations to support CMS learning and to broaden community involvement. By building a collaborative learning community beyond school, *students become active agents* in learning and developing CMS. In promoting self-agency and social guidance counselors acknowledged the role of week-long "introduction to working life" experiences during lower secondary school and job shadowing in upper secondary school in promoting self-agency and social skills. Workplace experiences were seen to help young people to acquire and actualize CMS in a real-world context:

Our students are divided into three groups, each with its own company, like a godfather/godmother arrangement. They work together for two years.

Through the TET process [week-long introduction to working life], I think they learn quite a few skills, such as how to approach an employer. When they get the job, they become involved in the community of workers at the workplace.

In this category, participants indicated that CMS assessment is important and requires joint investment and improvement. They noted that the new law for upper secondary schools means that more tools are needed for assessment and follow-up and to determine whether students are happy with their choices. Respondents expressed their commitment to CMS and emphasized the importance of continually updating their own knowledge and competence:

> Evaluation is very important, and it's something we should invest in more.

> As a guidance counsellor, you have to learn all the time. You have to update [knowledge] all the time. You have to be aware of what's happening in society and in educational policy.

Relationship Between the Categories

The categories of description were delineated and organized hierarchically in terms of dimensions of variation that emerged from the data. The structural hierarchy of inclusiveness means that some conceptions can be regarded as more complex and complete than others (Åkerlind, 2005).

The guidance counselors' *awareness of CMS* differed across the categories of description. In Categories 1 and 2 (CMS as information-based knowledge and CMS as personal skills development), participants were relatively *unfamiliar* with the concept of CMS were only *vaguely* aware of it. However, there was a qualitative leap in Categories 3 and 4 (CMS as interpersonal skills development and CMS as autonomous application of skills), where guidance counselors exhibited a *good* and more *comprehensive* understanding of CMS.

The prevailing *emphasis* varied across categories. In the least complex categories, where CMS was conceived as information-based knowledge and personal skills development, emphasis was placed on enhancing *opportunity awareness* (Category 1) and on *self-knowledge* (Category 2). In Categories 3 and 4 (interpersonal skills development and autonomous application of skills), the emphasis shifted to enhancing *decision making* (Category 3) and *transition learning* (Category 4) skills, respectively.

Regarding responsibility for *promotion of CMS*, the most distinct difference was in Category 1, where promotion of CMS was perceived solely as *guidance counselors' responsibility* while other categories acknowledged the role of others. In Category 2, responsibility widened to include every *individual teacher* in their own subject. Category 3 marked a turning point, with a shift from individual responsibility to a more *coordinated effort among teachers*. In a further significant shift, Category 4 included *collaboration beyond school*, conceiving of CMS as autonomous application of skills.

CMS *teaching practices* also varied across categories. In Category 1, teaching was seen in terms of *experts providing* students with the requisite *information* and knowledge. In Category 2, one-way instruction extended to participatory two-way interaction and *experts interacting with students*. Category 3 again marked a turning point, shifting from knowledge delivery to more supportive teaching as *students to collaborate* to become main actors in CMS learning. Finally, in the most complex Category 4, the teaching and learning space extended beyond school and students were seen as *active agents* and reflective inquirers in developing CMS.

Across the categories, *assessment* moved from *not needed* to *requiring joint investment*. Category 1 differed in this regard from all the other categories, in that guidance counselors saw *no need* for CMS assessment. In Category 2 (CMS as personal skills development), evaluating CMS was characterized as *non-systematic way*. In the two most complex Categories 3 and 4 (CMS as interpersonal skills development and CMS as autonomous application of skills), participants referred to the need for *improvement* (Category 3) and *joint investment* (Category 4).

Participants' *attitude* to CMS changed in a positive direction across the categories of description. In the first two categories, where CMS was conceived as information-based knowledge and personal skills development, the attitude was clearly more negative than in last two categories. In Category 1, guidance counselors were clearly *skeptical* about CMS, and they remained *hesitant* in Category 2. There was a discernible *positive* shift in Category 3, where participants expressed interest in developing CMS and noted its importance. An entirely positive and *committed* attitude was evident in Category 4, where CMS is conceived as autonomous application of skills.

Discussion

This study identified Finnish guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS in terms of four distinct descriptive categories (information-based knowledge to autonomous application of skills) and six dimensions of variation (awareness of CMS, emphasis, promotion of CMS, teaching practice, assessment, and attitude). The findings not only align with previous research in this area but also provide new insights into guidance counselors' conceptions of CMS. The main similarities to earlier studies (e.g., OECD, 2003; Sweet et al., 2014, 2009; Thomsen, 2014) relate to the first three categories. The present findings also confirm Neary et al.'s (2015) observation that the concept of CMS is not self-evident or well understood by all practitioners. Our findings also support Sultana's (2012) view that in-school CMS teaching tends to emphasize themes within the DOTS framework (Law, 1999, 2001; Law & Watts, 1977), and the assertion that strategies for assessing CMS require improvement (A. Barnes, 2009; Sultana, 2012, 2013).

The present findings also echo previous phenomenographic evidence (e.g., Kettunen et al., 2013; Koballa et al., 2000) indicating connections on teachers as well as career

practitioners' conceptions and practices. The information-based knowledge conception of CMS is closely linked to a directive approach while CMS as autonomous application of skills is associated with a more collaborative approach. The more complex and complete conceptions are also associated with move to a more open professional model of guidance that engages employees, employers, and others from the wider economic community (Barns et al., 2020; OECD, 2018) to ensure more holistic CMS development (Musset & Kurekova, 2018).

In Category 4 (the most complex category), the discernible shift to supporting autonomous application of CMS skills is associated with a comprehensive awareness of CMS in terms of transversal competences and a student-centered approach. Here, students become reflective participants and active agents in learning and developing CMS, emphasizing the value of assessment as learning (e.g., self-assessment, reflective thinking) in developing CMS. The findings also support Kettunen's (2017) notion of a paradigm shift from delivering information to co-careering, along with more conscious involvement of communities in which meanings and understandings are co-constructed.

This study provides an insight into guidance counselors' varying understanding of CMS by exploring the logical relationships between qualitatively different conceptions. The matrix developed here may serve as a catalyst for discussion and as a tool to deepen understanding of CMS among guidance counselors and trainers. We would argue that it is important to develop training and support for the expansion of guidance counselors' understanding of CMS using the critical aspects that were identified in this study. Through training guidance counselors can become aware of their own conceptions and practices and envision ways of moving toward more advanced approaches. This is increasingly important when considering the holistic development of CMS of young people.

The study has some limitations. Participation was voluntary, and data collected at a single time and place may not represent all of the critical issues. Future studies should therefore include guidance counselors in other countries. It would also be intriguing to investigate how students understand CMS, using phenomenography and classroom observations to explore how CMS is taught and implemented in practice.

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