

“To find a direction for life”.
Viewpoints for students’ development
of educational orientation during VALMA-studies
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research was to get a deeper understanding of the overall learning process students go through during their preparatory training for vocational education (VALMA) studies. The aim was to better understand the significance of VALMA- training programme in the development of students' educational and career orientation. The research questions were how VALMA-students' starting points vary, and how does the students' educational orientation develop during VALMA-studies.

This study was approached from two theoretical perspectives, career and educational decision making and student agency using narrative, text-based data collection method. In formulating the research questions, the underlying thought was biphasic data collection procedure. Data was collected from two different adolescent VALMA-groups, twice during one academic year.

A thematical analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data. Findings of this study show, that even though the starting points of the students would vary, it does not effect on the learning process negatively. Students' orientation to learning was able to develop in various ways during VALMA-studies. Results demonstrate how VALMA studies had personal significance for the students. The importance of daily routine, social contacts and positive environment emerged from the study. Results indicate, that VALMA-studies had helped the students in their goal of finding own field.

Keywords: educational orientation, preparatory training, student agency, career and educational decision making

SUOMENKIELINEN TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tavoittaa syvempi ymmärrys oppimisprosessista, jonka opiskelijat käyvät läpi ammatilliseen koulutukseen valmentavan koulutuksen (VALMA) aikana. Tavoitteena oli selvittää VALMA-opintojen merkitystä opiskelijoiden opinto- ja uravalinnan kehittymisessä. Tutkimuskysymykset olivat: miten VALMA-opiskelijoiden lähtökohdat vaihtelevat, ja kuinka opiskelijoiden opiskeluorientaatio kehittyi VALMA-opintojen aikana.

Tutkimusta lähestyttiin kahdesta teoreettisesta viitekehyksestä, opinto- ja uravalinta sekä opiskelijan toimijuus. Tutkimusmenetelmänä käytettiin narratiivista, tekstiin pohjautuvaa aineistonkeräystä. Aineisto kerättiin kahdelta VALMA-ryhmältä yhden lukuvuoden aikana, kaksi kertaa molemmilta ryhmiltä.

Aineistoa analysoitiin ja tulkittiin temaattisen sisällönanalyysin avulla. Tuloksista käy ilmi, että vaikka VALMA-opiskelijoiden lähtökohdat vaihtelisivat, sillä ei ole negatiivista vaikutusta oppimisprosessiin. Opiskelijoiden opiskeluorientaatio kehittyi monella tapaa opintojen aikana. Tulokset osoittavat VALMA-opintojen henkilökohtaisen tärkeyden. Päivittäisen rutiinin, sosiaalisten kontaktien ja positiivisen ympäristön merkitys korostui tuloksissa. Tulokset osoittavat VALMA-opintojen auttaneen opiskelijoita löytämään paremmin oman alansa.

Asiasanat: opiskeluorientaatio, valmentava koulutus, opiskelijan toimijuus, opiskelu- ja uravalinta

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1 INTRODUCTION

Recent changes in the Finnish upper secondary vocational education as well as in the Finnish working life have led adolescents into a situation where they have to make decisions about their future very early in life (Eteläpelto et al. 2011a). Transition points as well as career and educational choices require quite a lot from a young person. Adolescents are expected to make lasting choices regarding education and work in a context where constant, uncertain changes as well as temporary and part-time jobs have become a part of everyday life (Eteläpelto et al. 2011a). More and more active agency is required both in working life as well as in education. One needs to know one's own capabilities, interests, available resources, foresight the future, just to mention a few things. In other words, decision-making requires agency. As Mullaly (2014) notes, agency can have a direct influence on decision-making effectiveness. Agency is power to build own, personal life-course (Vanhalakka-Ruoho 2015).

Finnish school system has been built on a compulsory education system lasting until adolescent turns 18 years. By autumn 2021, compulsory education or the obligation to study lasted until adolescent turned 17 or received a certificate from compulsory school. However, the extension of compulsory education took place in autumn 2021, making it necessary to take part in some guided action or education until the age of 18. The change also brought along free upper secondary education. After basic school, which lasts nine grades, there are basically two educational choices. Adolescents must choose whether they will apply either to general upper secondary education leading to matriculation exam or vocational upper secondary education leading to a vocational qualification.

However, the Finnish National Agency for Education, OPH, (2021) has developed some flexible study tracks to help the transition point between basic education and upper secondary level, which are preparatory training for vocational education, voluntary additional basic education and instruction preparing for general upper secondary education. These study programmes are aimed at supporting successful transitions as well as promoting the continuity in students'

lifelong learning. These educational programmes also answer the needs of adolescents outside of work and education. Another change that the extension of compulsory education will bring along later from autumn 2022 on, is the combination of the three educational programmes. There will be then only one educational programme supporting the transition phase, called preparatory training for upper secondary education.

One of the flexible study tracks for the transition point between basic education and upper secondary level is the preparatory training for vocational upper secondary education, later called as VALMA (coming from the Finnish words of the study programme), and it acts as the research environment of this study. VALMA is aimed at students who have completed basic school and who intend to undertake vocational education. It is also suitable for those adolescents outside of school and work who want to improve their readiness to study a vocational upper secondary qualification (City of Helsinki 2018). The national curriculum for VALMA (OPH 2019) notes that the goal of the study programme is to give skills for the student that help in applying for vocational studies as well as strengthen the student's abilities in conducting a vocational qualification. The purpose is also to promote the students' equality, enable individual study paths as well as make the transition point more flexible to increase the passing rate of vocational education and thus answer the objectives of the extension of compulsory education.

There might be several reasons for taking part in VALMA-studies. For example, many young people are without a clear idea of their career choice, or they need some more practise to cope with vocational studies. Some VALMA-students have an immigrant background but need more skills in Finnish language as well as in Finnish education and working culture prior moving to vocational studies. No matter if the students have an immigrant or Finnish background; a connective feature between a typical VALMA-student is the unawareness of their future career choice. Other factors behind the choice of taking VALMA-studies can be the lack of motivation for studies, some special educational needs or just the need of an extra year before moving to upper secondary education.

1.1 Education and career decision making

The role of education and career has always been significant in Finnish society. Employment has traditionally been a source of income, foundation of social structure and a way to participate in the societal action; nowadays it is seen more and more as a way of self-expression (Turunen 2009). Work and education are strongly present in Juntunen's (2020) study, where education and studies emerged from the spirals adolescents drew on their life. Juntunen (2020) suggests that one reason for the significance of education in her research could be that education is seen as a ticket to society, to employment and work. However, adolescents' conceptions on work vary. More than half of the adolescents taking part in Juntunen's (2020) study think that there are more important things in life than work. Nevertheless, work defines the adolescent's understanding of oneself and own capabilities (Juntunen 2020).

Pirttiniemi (2004) mentions that education is nowadays more often a requirement for employment. However, the traditional, continuous from education to work-path is not followed by majority of the adolescents, and more and more attention is given to the moment and fluency of the transitions (Kojo 2012). In a society where requirements for social security have been tightened up, adolescents are urged to graduate and finish their vocational qualification faster and the number of choices have considerably increased, education and career decision-making may seem overwhelming. Adolescents' need many kinds of capital to cope in the life changing transition (Mäkinen 2016).

Decisions made on education and career have a significant meaning in adolescents' entire life course. The process starts in basic education and in today's world perhaps never ends. Grytnes (2011) points three central elements in young people's processes of making educational choices: 1. habitus and the person's distance or closeness to necessity, 2. reflexivity or their form of participation in the process of biography construction and 3. their form of reasoning in relation to their choices. In addition to the elements of the decision-making process, there are lots of stakeholders and factors influencing adolescent's decision. Mäkinen

(2016) states that central factors in a successful transition include adolescent's social networks, social courage, emotional resiliency as well as support from the family and other networks. Lappalainen (2010) mentions that adolescents build a picture of work and education little by little from different sources; through periods of work experience, company visits as well as study counselling. Media is also a powerful source of information, just Google it, and you have the answers right in your hands. In addition, understanding the capabilities of own self as a learner play a major role in decision-making process (Mäkinen 2016).

Theoretical models of career decision have been developed to answer the questions why an individual chooses a particular career path, how is career choice influenced by others and what social factors are involved in career decision-making (Goodall 2017). Bandura (2006) writes, that a major goal of formal education is to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their life course. Bandura's (2006) theory on self-efficacy is strongly connected to agency, which is the main theme of the next chapter. Bandura is well known and regarded for his social cognitive theory, which goes well hand in hand with career and education decision making. As Buchanan (2016) writes, Bandura's (1994) self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to influence events that effect one's life and control over the way these events are experienced. Bandura (2006) emphasizes human capacity rather than human failings and dysfunction and explains how self-efficacy can be influenced and developed, and how it positively effects all facets of human experience.

1.2 Student Agency

The definition of agency is often connected with characteristics like activeness, intent, participation, possibilities to choose and make a difference and the skill to choose own action (Kumpulainen et al. 2010). Kumpulainen et al. (2010) continue, that agency reflects to an identity that has been formed through participation,

together with an understanding of the available resources and their suitable use. Hitlin and Johnson (2015) argue that individuals with a sense of personal agency demonstrate capacities such as motivation, psychological traits, chance, self-direction, planfulness and rational choice, but agency is not severely a motivational drive or an inborn psychological trait. They continue that it is more like Mirowsky and Ross (2007) suggest, a resource that individuals develop and that varies across social class, personal experiences as well as the life-course (Hitlin & Johnson 2015). To look it at that point of view, agency is very much related to education and career decision making process.

According to Eteläpelto et al. (2013), the concept of agency has become increasingly popular in different areas of research, such as education, the social sciences and in working-life studies. In addition, agency has become a topical issue in policy-level talk, where it has been associated with the challenges of continuous learning, and with labour markets characterized by increasing uncertainty (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Hitlin and Johnson (2015) remark that in recent socio-cultural theories of learning and development, learning has not only been seen as the individual's active construction and generation of knowledge, but also as social participation involving the construction of identities in socio-culturally determined knowledge communities. So to say, it is important to understand agency as a societal phenomenon. Kumpulainen et al. (2010) note that the changes in the age distribution and the social services in our society demote some matters increasingly to the responsibility of people's own agency, as agency flourish, develops and shapes through interaction.

Many studies show that agency can develop over time, but according to Kumpulainen et al. (2010), recent research suggests that more and more adolescents appear to lack the sense of competence and agency. Wanting to bring up adolescents with a sense of being in control of their own lives, true attention must be paid to support the development of their agency. As Larson and Angus (2011) state, the objective of many adolescent education programmes is building skills related to agency; they aim to build adolescents' abilities to work towards goals.

Kumpulainen et al. (2010) quote Gresalfi et al. (2009), mentioning that the development of agency needs opportunities to take initiative and make decisions. Consequently, it is the interactional culture existing at school, at home or at the workplace that has an influence on the development of agency. Thus, agency is a result of action and participation, so anyone's agency can be developed (Kumpulainen et al. 2010).

1.3 Research questions

The idea of this research emerged from my own background as a teacher of preparatory training for vocational education. When I was working as a VALMA-teacher, I noticed the importance of study guidance and the need for continuous learning skills related to career decision making. The main purpose for me as a VALMA-teacher was to enhance the students' self-knowledge and capabilities regarding career choice-making and life management skills. Thus, I wanted to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomena and student's thoughts with this study.

I approached the study from two theoretical perspectives, career and educational decision making as well as student agency. One of the aims of the study was to examine the development of VALMA-students' educational orientation during their studies. Agency on the other hand came along, because one of the VALMA-programme's goals is to enhance students' equality in education and in working life as well as reaching good life as a member of society. I was interested to study how VALMA-students' starting points vary, and what kind of impacts the starting point has in their VALMA-studies in general. I like how Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2014) say in their research on teacher students' learning experiences, that they are seeking to better understand those who they are working with. That is something that I strongly related to in my research; I wanted to know more about the process the students go through during their VALMA-

studies to better understand the significance of VALMA-programme in the development of students' educational and career orientation.

In formulating the research questions, the underlying thought was biphasic data collection procedure, based on written assignments that VALMA-students do during their studies. These assignments act as the data sets of this study. The first assignment is done quite in the beginning of their studies, and the other one after they have completed joint application process. The assignments consist of questions related to the themes of this study and the purpose was to find answers for this research by comparing the data from the two data sets. To find the key features related to this study, the following research questions were formed:

1. In what ways do the starting point of VALMA-students vary?
2. How does the students' educational orientation develop during VALMA-studies?

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative research using narrative, text-based data collection method. Qualitative approach was chosen because it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the participants it involves (Mack et al. 2005). Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of participants (Mack et al. 2005). Narrative research method on the other hand enables the researcher to explore the meanings of human action and phenomena constructed in narratives, to understand more about the individual and the change (Andrews et al. 2013).

With narrative approach, I wanted to give the adolescent students the possibility to introduce their own experiences with their own words. This kind of autobiographical narrative approach has a well-established history in educational research, as Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2014) introduce in their study. Biesta and Tedder (2007) underline the important relationship between agency and biographical learning, describing that learning about the formulation of one's agentic orientations and how they play out in one's life can play an important role in the achievement of agency.

To be able to examine the development of the students' educational orientation, I have chosen biphasic data collection process with written data. The figure 1 on the next page explains the relationship between the theoretical framework and my research setting, with the timeline of the data collection process.

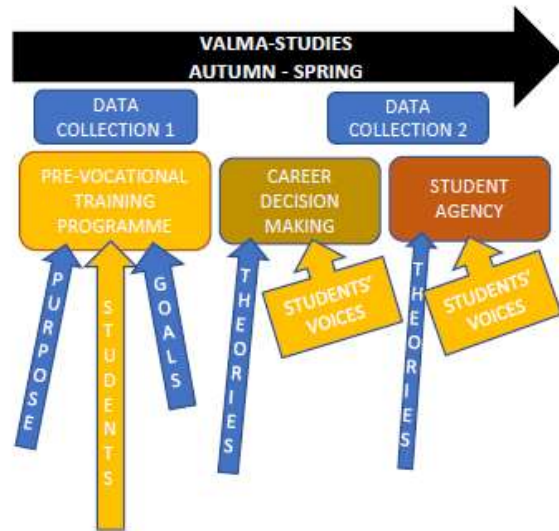


Figure 1. *Research setting.*

2.1 Research Context and Participants of the Study

The initial plan was to gather the research data from some VALMA-groups in one of the upper secondary vocational colleges in the capital region of Finland. The college in question was chosen as I had good contacts with the college due to my work history. The vocational college offers multiple options for secondary vocational education, also preparatory training for vocational education (VALMA). VALMA-groups, which were many in the college, were divided roughly between adults' and adolescents' group. One group consisted about 20 students and one main teacher. The groups were situated in all the college's locations.

Eventually, I decided to concentrate on two different VALMA-groups, of which students consisted of adolescents under 20-years old. They had started their VALMA-studies in autumn 2018, so the data collection and research took place during the academic year 2018-2019. The size of the groups in paper were over 10 students, consisting of both native Finnish students as well as Finnish as a second language students. During the first data collection in autumn 2018, there

were 5 students taking part in the research in both groups. During the second data collection, which took place in spring 2019, there were 5 and 4 students taking part in the research.

2.2 Data Collection

My data collection process was biphasic. The first round of data collection took place in the autumn 2018, when students had just started their VALMA-studies. As part of their studies, they were given a paper titled 'Me as a VALMA-student' to write, where they were expected to tell a little about themselves. The written assignments, which I received altogether from 10 students, worked as the first data set of this research. To help the students in their writing, some guiding questions were given, such as:

- Where did you come to VALMA?
- Why did you choose VALMA-studies?
- How do the studies feel now?
- What do you expect from the studies?
- What skills would you like to develop during studies?
- Is your educational/career choice clear?

The second part of the data was collected in the winter/spring 2019, after the students had filled in their joint application documents, which is one of the objectives stated in the curriculum of VALMA. The time was chosen because joint application procedure is considered as an important part of VALMA-studies, and the students are expected to have their options for educational and career choices ready by that. The second assignment was titled also as "Me as a VALMA-student", but with a slightly different viewpoint than in the first one. The purpose of the second assignment was to give the word to the students, where they can freely reflect to the first paper and their VALMA-studies, whether their hopes and goals were fulfilled, were they able to choose their future study field and

other significant matters related to their studies. Guiding questions were given at this time as well, such as:

- How have VALMA-studies help you in educational/career decision making?
- What kind of skills have developed during your studies?
- Is there something else you want to tell about related to VALMA-studies, e.g. social aspects, self-knowledge, schooling...?

The length of the assignments varied from 4 sentences to half A4-pages during both collection times. I decided already in the planning phase of my research to handle the data anonymously, so identification codes for the participants were created. The codes were formed quite simply by using the number of the data collection time, group, and student, eg. 1.1.1, 2.1.1. With the help of the codes, I was able to combine the data from both groups and data collection times. After that, I was able to examine the data more precisely to start my analysis phase.

2.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis method was chosen for this research, as it is a widely used qualitative data analysis method in educational research. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within data. Braun and Clarke (2006) continue that a theme captures something important about the data related to the research question and represents some level of meaning within the data set. I have chosen more of an inductive way of thematic analysis method for my research, where coding and theme development are directed by the content of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). However, constructing categories completely inductively or completely deductively is rare in research practice (Kuckartz 2014), so I have followed a midway practice between inductive and deductive.

In the data analysis process, I have lightly followed Kuckartz (2014, p. 7) model on qualitative thematic text analysis. The figure 2 below describes the analysis process of the data of this thesis, based on Kuckartz (2014, p. 7) model.

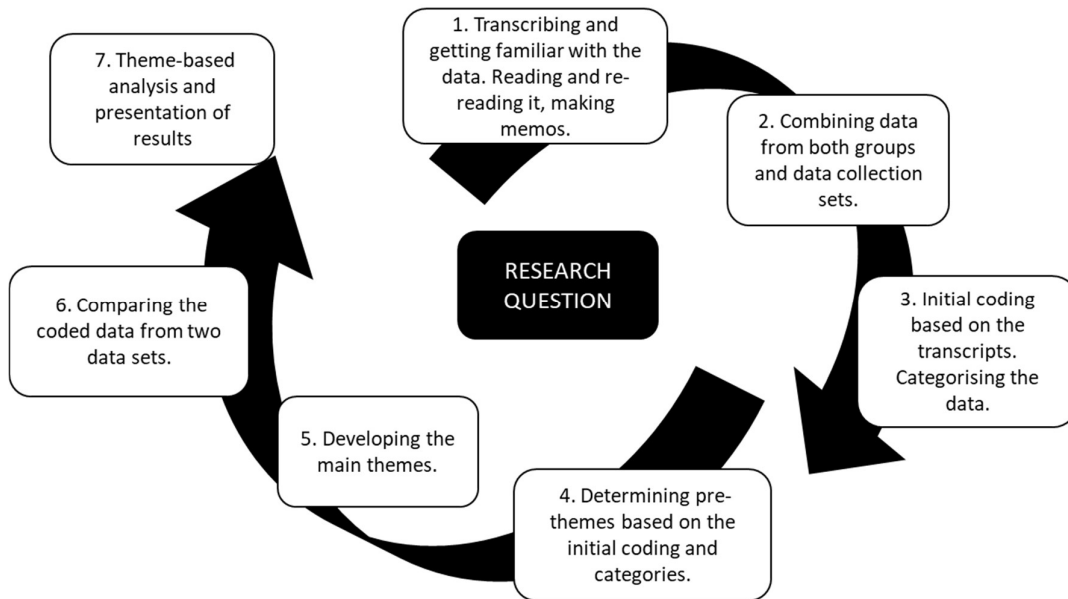


Figure 2. *Thematic Qualitative Text Analysis Process, based on Kuckartz (2014, p. 7) model.*

I began my analysis by transcribing the data and getting familiar with it, keeping in mind the research questions. I read the data carefully through several times, to become immersed and entirely familiar with its content. After that, in the first stage of the analysis, I combined the data from each group and data set, having two sets of data, one from the autumn and one from the spring. Then I looked at the transcribed texts and started the coding process by evaluating its content, to be able to create initial codes for each sentence. At this point, I thought very carefully of what counts as a theme. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), a theme catches something important about the data in relation to the research question and that researcher perception is necessary to determine what a theme is.

In creating the initial codes, I followed the content of the data keeping in mind the research questions. Relevant for the first research question was the first

data collection set, and for the second research question both sets, so I needed to carefully handle the entire coding process. After this point, I had multiple codes, which I then had to narrow by determining second codes, which in this case acted as pre-themes. According to Kuckartz (2014), in most cases a multi-stage process of categorizing and coding is used, as I have done in my analysis process.

In the final phase of my analysis, I needed again to look for the content of the data, pre-themes, and research questions in parallel to determine the main themes. In this phase, six final themes were found. For the first data set, there were four main themes: 1. Starting setting, 2. Career orientation, 3. Attitudes towards self-development and support, 4. Orientation to learning. For the second data set, three main themes emerged: 1. Career orientation, 2. Learning process, 3. Personalisation. One of the themes was same in both sets, and overall, the themes support answering the research questions, which findings chapter describes in more detail. The formation process of the codes and themes can be seen from two different tables introduced in the beginning of the findings chapter.

2.4 Ethical Solutions

As this study was conducted in school context, the ethical considerations should be considered carefully. Before the data collection took place, I had agreed with two VALMA-teachers the times when I could participate in their class, when their students were supposed to make the assignments used also in my research. I was present at both data collection dates. As it is essential to build trust with the participants and explain what the study is for (Heath et al. 2010), VALMA-students were informed about the nature and purpose of my research by myself orally. They were shown the written information notification of my study as well the data privacy statement. I informed that if they would agree, I would use their assignments anonymously in my research, and the second collection time for the data would take place the following spring. I also noted that if there was someone who would not like to participate, that was ok. All except one student from the

first group were willing to participate during the first round, and during the second round all agreed.

I explained the students that I was there to help them, should they have any questions. The guiding questions, mentioned earlier in this chapter, were written in the blackboard, so students were able to lean on them when writing. After the students were done with their assignments, I numbered them, copied, and gave back to the students. I stored only the numbered, copied data papers without the names of students. I used the same procedure during both data collection points.

Written data was chosen instead of interviews based on my experiences on VALMA-students, some students may be restricted during an interview situation. With written data, I also wanted to have less intimate data collection procedure than with interviews. However, I was thinking of interviewing the students after the second data collection period, but I relinquished the idea as the students were starting their practical work placements outside of school, and it would have turned out quite difficult.

3 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main findings of the study. The findings are divided into two sections, after each research question. The findings are presented according to the main themes in each section, where they are examined more profoundly. At first in both chapters, a table presenting the data analysis procedure leading to the main themes are introduced. The first table (table 1) presents the process from the first data collection time, and the second table (table 2) presents the process from the second collection time. There are excerpts in the tables and in the text to support the process as well as the findings. It should be noted here that the research took place in Finnish, and the transcripts have been translated into English. Only English excerpts are introduced in this study.

3.1 Starting points of VALMA-students

The first research question was: in what ways do the starting point of VALMA-students vary? The four main themes, starting setting, attitudes towards self-development and support, orientation to learning and career orientation, represent one same phenomenon in the research question, the starting point of the students. The findings will be explained next by main themes, each in its own chapter.

Starting setting of the students consisted of the feelings in the beginning of the studies as well as way to VALMA-studies. According to the students, their feeling about the studies varied from neutral to positive. No negative feelings were emerged, but there were notes that the studies “feel sometimes little boring” or “studies do not feel anything special”, compared to the positive expressions such as “atmosphere in the class feels very relaxed” and the “studies feel nice and easy at the moment”. It could be identified that the ones feeling more neutral with the studies express that it is not always that easy to start new studies and group with new classmates. The students’ ways to VALMA-studies turned out

to be quite similar. Most of the students came from school to VALMA, only one student from another activity.

The attitudes towards self-development and support varied among the students from openness and goal-orientation to the affection of irrespectiveness with low expectations or weak goals. Students noted as their goals e.g., “to become more courageous and (self)-confident” and “I expect that some field of work would start to interest me”. There is a positive, self-developmental background in the comments, whereas the ones with weaker expectations stated, “I don’t know where I would like to develop in” or “I don’t know what expectations I have”, representing distinctly neutral or negative, indifference motions about their goals or expectations.

Students’ orientation to learning is closely connected to the attitudes towards self-development and support. There were many statements indicating clear learning goals in both soft skills, “I would like to develop in social relations and situations” as well as academic skills “I want to develop in English language” or “I expect of being able to raise some grades”. However, some of those students representing indifference, were not able express their orientation to learning, as one of the students noted “I expect nothing special”.

Many of the students were not able to indicate their career or educational choice yet. However, their career orientation seemed to be merely on the future-looking or confident side. This shows through from the comments like “I came to Valma to seek and think what I would like to do and study” or with a quite strong expression like “I expect directions for life”. Even some of the students expressed that “the choice of profession feels clear to me”. The viewpoints were confident that either their educational choice seemed clear already, or it will clarify during their VALMA-studies.

1st DATA SET TRANSCRIPT EXTRACTS	TRANSCRIPT EXTRACTS	INITIAL CODING		2nd CODING/ PRE-THEMES	MAIN THEMES
<i>“Basic school” “Instruction pre- paring for basic education”</i>	<i>“From reha- bilitative work activ- ity”</i>	From school to VALMA – DIRECT	From other activity, not from school	Way to VALMA	STARTING SETTING
<i>“Atmosphere in the class is nice, feels ok” “Very relaxed”</i>	<i>“Studies do not feel any- thing spe- cial” “Some- times little frustrating”</i>	VALMA posi- tive envi- ronment	VALMA envi- ronment neutral, not always easy	Feeling about VALMA	
<i>“I came to Valma to seek and think what I would like to do and study” “To find a field of vocation”</i>	<i>“I expect di- rections for life” “Would find a direction what I would start doing”</i>	Vocational field missing	Looking for life direction	Looking for fu- ture path	CAREER ORI- ENTATION
<i>“The choice of profession feels clear to me”</i>	<i>“I want to study as a dentist”</i>	Own field clear		Confidence on future path	
<i>To become more coura- geous and (self)confident</i>	<i>“I expect that some field of work would start to interest me”</i>	Open for support	Open for self-devel- opment	Need for support & development of self- knowledge, openness	ATTITUDES TOWARDS SELF-DEVEL- OPMENT & SUPPORT
<i>“I expect noth- ing special” “I don’t know what expecta- tions I have”</i>	<i>“I don’t know where I would like to develop in”</i>	Weak ex- pecta- tions/goals		Low expecta- tions/ interest. Irrespective/in- different	
<i>“I want to de- velop myself in social and inter- action skills” “I would like to develop in social relations and situations”</i>	<i>“To be ac- cepted in vo- cational school, and after that I want to go working”</i>	Personal goals con- cerning so- cial and in- teraction skills	Personal goal getting a ca- reer	Learning goals clear Soft skills	ORIENTA- TION TO LEARNING
<i>“I want to learn more Finnish language” “I want to de- velop in English language”</i>	<i>“I expect of being able to raise some grades”</i>	Personal goal Finn- ish/English language learning.	Raising grades from basic school	Academic skills	

Table 1. *Categorised data and themes of the first data collection set.*

3.2 Development of educational orientation

The second research question was: How does the students' educational orientation develop during VALMA-studies? To answer this, it was important to examine the data from the second data set, but also compare the data from the first and second collection round, as the study was about the development process of students' educational orientation. Guest et al. (2012) note, that whether attempting to discern similarities and differences across groups of individuals or several data collection times, comparisons are essential to the data analysis process and presentation of findings. The findings will be presented in two ways, the data set as a whole and the development process individually of those students, who answered in both data collection time points.

The main themes for the second round were career orientation, learning process and personalisation. All students had an idea about their future path in the second data collection time, which took place quite in the end of their studies. Many of them indicated that VALMA-studies had helped them in finding their own field, "studies have clarified my view about the study field that I want to study" and "I found a field that interests me and applied to school". The personal learning process of the students proved to be positive based on the answers. There were many kinds of notions how their soft or academic skills had developed, or they recognised other kind of self-development. One student stated about the skills that had developed during studies "perhaps social skills have advanced, courage", while another mentioned "group skills". The development of academic skills was mentioned such as "I have learned more Finnish", "reading skills have improved and English". As there were also comments on the support and help of the teacher, for example "teacher helped, although I had to be absent sometimes", it could be said that a positive learning environment created positive learning outcomes.

Students were able to recognise the usefulness of VALMA for their continuous studies, as they wrote "I applied in media field, and Valma gives the necessary points", or "other skills, that have advanced during studies are knowledge on vocational schools, different professions and also about climate change", and

“skills related finding an apartment, communication skills and job searching skills have developed”. Many of them indicated how VALMA studies were somehow significant for them personally. The importance of daily routine came out quite strongly in few answers, as they wrote “it has been good going to school again and get something to do” and stating a bit proudly that “I have been able to go to school from home”. The social aspect of VALMA-studies should not be forgotten, as many students’ answers contained notes that either their social skills had been improved or “I have gotten social contacts. Got a new friend”. VALMA-studies had an important meaning for many students when considering social aspects, and from the answers personal growth can be seen.

2nd DATA SET TRANSCRIPT EX- TRACTS	TRANSCRIPT EX- TRACTS	INITIAL CODING	2nd CODING/PRE- THEMES	MAIN THEMES
<i>“Studies have clarified my view about the study field that I want to study”</i>	<i>“During studies I have gotten some clarity about the possibilities that I have”</i>	Own field clarified during VALMA	Finding own field during studies	CAREER ORIENTATION
<i>“Skills related finding an apartment, communication skills, job searching skills”</i>	<i>“Group skills” “Perhaps social skills have advanced, courage”</i>	Learning – life-management skills, social/interaction skills, self-knowledge	Indications of learning both in academic & in soft skills	LEARNING PROCESS
<i>“My own field, perhaps baker, can do with hands”</i>	<i>“I have learned to speak Finnish to others”</i>	Learning – self-knowledge, interaction skills	Recognition of self-development	
<i>“Knowledge on vocational schools, professions and also about climate change”</i>	<i>“I have learned other professions” “I have learned Finnish” “Reading. English”</i>	Learning – life-long learning skills, academic skills		
<i>“It has also been good going to school again and get something to do”</i>	<i>“I have been able to go to school from home” “I have gotten social contacts. Got new friend”</i>	Meaningfulness of VALMA for personal life	Answering individual needs	PERSONALISATION
<i>“It was good that teacher was helping in the joint application process”</i>	<i>“Teacher helped. Although I had to be absent sometimes”</i>	Received support from teacher		

Table 2. *Categorised data and themes of the second data collection set.*

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, the development of the educational orientation individually by each student will be introduced here too. A diagram presenting students personal development on the next page contains the data findings from both sets. The findings are organised by the main themes with a scale 1-12, 1-3 meaning low/weak, 4-7 neutral in the middle and 8-12 representing high/positive results in the upper level. The numerals express the findings from the data, which have been roughly evaluated as numbers from 1-12.

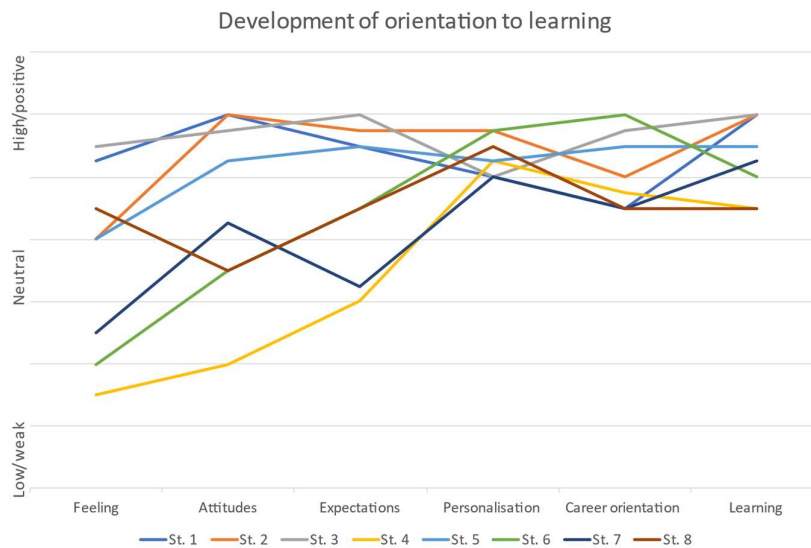


Figure 3. Diagram on students personal development during VALMA-studies.

As can be seen from the diagram, even the students with lower or weaker starting points were able to indicate positive outcomes of VALMA-studies. None of the students expressed negative or low expectations in the end of the studies, everyone had even more than two areas, where they indicated positive learning process, clarification concerning career and study orientation, or some other personal significance of VALMA. Based on the findings, it could be concluded that even though the starting points of the students would vary in different matters,

it does not effect on the learning process itself negatively. The students' orientation to learning seemed to develop in various ways during VALMA-studies, no matter were they concerning academic or soft skills or other skills needed in the students' life course.

4 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to get a deeper understanding of the overall learning process students go through during their VALMA-studies, to better understand the significance of VALMA-programme in the development of students' educational and career orientation. The research questions were how VALMA-students' starting points vary, and what kind of development of educational orientation they experience during their VALMA-studies. The next paragraphs will go through the findings connected with the theoretical framework, validity of this research as well as some future applications of this study.

4.1 Agency in VALMA-context

Active agency is required both in working life as well as in education, as one needs to know one's own capabilities, interests, and available resources. As Vanhalakka-Ruoho (2015) notes, agency is power to build own, personal life-course. One of the aims of this study was to examine the development of VALMA-students' educational orientation during their studies. Agency came along, because VALMA-programme's goals are to enhance students' equality in education as well as supporting successful transitions and promoting the continuity in their lifelong learning. Bandura (2006, 7) confirms this saying that "a major goal of formal education is to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their lifetime".

Decisions made on education and career have a significant meaning in adolescents' entire life course. Work defines the adolescent's understanding of oneself and own capabilities (Juntunen 2020). In addition, understanding the capabilities of own self as a learner play a major role in decision-making process

(Mäkinen 2016). As Larson and Angus (2011) state, the objective of many adolescent education programmes is building skills related to agency, they aim to build adolescents' abilities to work towards goals.

Learning the process of goal-setting, one of the aims of VALMA-curriculum, is important, as it comes through the findings of this study. According to the findings, the starting setting of the students varied to some extent in the beginning of their studies. The attitudes towards self-development and support varied from openness and goal-orientation to the affection of irrespectiveness with low expectations or weak goals. Students' orientation to learning was closely connected to the attitudes towards self-development and support. There were many indications of clear learning goals. However, some of those students representing indifference, were not able express their orientation to learning. Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) suggest that encouraging adolescent students to set process goals will have both achievement and motivational advantages because it directs completing the essential parts of a particular task.

Even though many of the students were not able to indicate their career or educational choice yet in the beginning of their studies, their career orientation seemed to be merely on the future-looking or confident side. As Bandura (2006) notes, adolescents need to commit themselves to goals that give them purpose. He continues, that without personal commitment to something worth doing, they are unmotivated, bored, or cynical. The results of this study show, that VALMA-studies had helped them in their goal of finding their own field.

The personal learning process of the students proved to be positive based on this study. Soft and academic skills had developed, or they recognised other kind of self-development. Results show how VALMA studies were somehow significant for them personally. The importance of daily routine, social contacts and positive environment came out quite strongly. This is supported by Jääskelä et al. (2017), as they suggest that students' agency is built and actualised in learning situations that offer opportunities for participation and for recognising one's own strengths, interests, and goals, and provide resources for the development of an identity as a learner and a future professional.

Based on the findings, it could be concluded that even though the starting points of the students would vary in different matters, it does not effect on the learning process itself negatively. Even the students with lower or weaker starting points were able to indicate positive outcomes of VALMA-studies. Klemenčič (2015) underlines that to be agentic, it is crucial that students act intentionally, even if it is not supported by a clear idea of goals or action plans, but some anticipation of likely outcomes and some belief in one's efficacy. This study shows, that students' orientation to learning was able to develop in various ways during VALMA-studies. The connection of agency is supported by Klemenčič (2015), who notes that student agency is conceptualised as a process of student actions and interactions during studentship, which covers variable notions of agentic orientation; the way students relate to past, present and future in making choices of action and interaction, and of agentic possibility, that is their perceived power to achieve intended outcomes in a particular context of action and interaction.

4.2 Validity of this study

For the validity of this study, several notions have been made during the quite long process of this study. According to Oluwatayo (2012), validity in educational research consists of face and content validity. Face validity is important, as it refers to researchers' subjective assessments of the presentation to whether it appears to be relevant, reasonable, and clear. To begin with, I have tried to keep up the transparency in my research work during the entire time. At first, I tried to be as clear as possible for the students before starting the data collection process. I explained the entire process to them, let them know about my study as well as how their personal data would be gathered and handled. The document notification of the study and data handling in Finnish language were also shown to the students.

Content validity evidence on the other hand has the focus on determination of whether a measuring its items have a fair sample of the total potential content

(Oluwatayo 2012). What comes to the collected data, even though it was not that much physically, and may have some effects on the validity of this study, it presents quite well the studied group, and the purposes of my research. I thought of interviewing some of the participants in the end of the process, to receive even deeper knowledge, but the time was not on my side, so I decided to my best with the material I received.

However, I was there to help and guide the students in all time during both data collection times, as a form of researcher, not as teacher, as I was not teaching them at all during the research process. So, I was able to do research observations at the same time, to avoid bias that comes from single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies (Guest et al. 2012). With the triangulation of my collection methods as well as combining two theories, student agency and career decision making, I have been able to correct some of the weaknesses that may occur with the amount of the data. I tried to translate the students answers from Finnish to English as accurately as possible. To enhance transparency, I have added several transcripts to support my findings, and thereby the validity of the results.

Reliability is also one of the most desirable technical merits in qualitative research. Here it is regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what occurs in the natural setting that is being researched (Oluwatayo 2012). In my opinion, the results of this study could be generally applied in other transitional training programmes meant for adolescents. I also think that the theoretical framework for this study supports my findings well. I personally consider the findings to be very interesting and helpful when planning for example future training programmes, curriculum, and content. The findings could also be applied with theories linked to pedagogical leadership, from organisational as well as student's point of view.

4.3 Words for the future

As the background of this study was personal, due to my history as a VALMA-teacher and study counsellor, the theoretical framework related to student agency and study and career decision-making was overwhelmingly interesting and wide. I have gone through many sources with interesting points supporting my research plan and findings and have been delighted how these phenomena have been studied more during recent years. The beginning of this study took place almost four years ago, and the world, the educational environment in Finland as well as my personal career has changed from that. A new transitional training programme, preparatory training for upper secondary education (TUVA), is taking over VALMA, combining three different training programmes, aiming for different educational systems, together. This study might bring some eye-opening thoughts for the new module-based programme, and together with aspects from pedagogical leadership, it could be of use in planning different procedures of the programme.

Why I have added pedagogical leadership here, is concerning few important matters related to this research. The first is cooperational part of the new training programme, as there are several educational providers organising it and each providing perhaps even different contents. Interaction and cooperation will be crucial to ensure students' successful development stories also in the future, to ensure that there will be possibility for the development of student agency and educational orientation. Second, it is because I think pedagogical leadership, which is something I am studying further at this moment, it is an aspect to kept in mind when thinking of the overall process of learning and people involving in it, from leisure time to education and career. It is concerned with the past, present and the future, as has been discussed in this study. In other words, agency is owning own learning process, taking leadership of own learning. In today's world, continuous learning skills and the possibility for agential development have become civics for us all.

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