Reaching the STARS

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND



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In 2008, the EU Council defined guidance as *lifelong* guidance, or, in other words:

”[A] continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used.”

This definition clearly reflects the need for good guidance and counselling practices for helping adult learners, who may be in the process of changing jobs or acquiring a higher level education. Since the definition concerns adult learners of all ages and backgrounds, the right tools must be made available for educators and counsellors, whether their learners are young adults looking for a study path, or more experienced adult learners seeking counselling for their career or educational choices.

In envisioning good practices, however, it is crucial to look first at the various social factors that may affect guidance and counselling. An understanding of these factors is necessary for the effective development guidance and counselling, if the goal is to help adult learners from all backgrounds to manage their own career and study paths.

SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

Socioeconomic background is one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement (Claro, Pauneski, Dweck, 2016). In Finland, for instance, many adolescents from lower income families with a lower parental educational history and a weaker parental labour market status are left without higher education (Vanttaja, 2005). Another factor which clearly influences educational choices is gender. In Finland, men tend to gravitate towards the STEM field, while women more often apply for social and health care programmes. Even educated immigrant women are encouraged to switch to healthcare from technical professions (Forsander, 2007).

Finally, besides socioecnomic background and gender, age is crucial in determining how counsellors approach guidance. Children are usually still allowed to dream and envision

their future without any limitations, but already in middle school the emphasis often shifts to a more realistic self-reflection on one's skills, capabilities and academic performance (Ollila, 2008).

Similar trends can be observed in other European countries as well. In Slovenia, research has shown that parents' educational history clearly influences their children's study and career choices. Higher educated parents tend to record higher incomes, and they usually possess higher academic ambitions. Moreover, it is easier for more educated parents to guide their children on an educatioinal path, as well as to pay for lengthier studies (Umek, Soèan & Bajc, 2007).

In Slovenia, low-skilled and older workers are the most vulnerable group on the labour market. Their unemployment rate is still relatively high, despite a recent decline, and the situation is complicated by the fact that technological change will gradually require an increasingly educated workforce. As a result, more investment in adult education will be needed, so that people over the age of 45 will be able to enter the labour market in the near future (Klenovšek & Rupert, 2011).

Data from Poland suggests that, besides the amount of funding, the correct allocation of funds is central in the implementation of lifelong guidance. Although public funds allocated to education in Poland do not significantly differ from the EU average, the country has one of the lowest rates of adults aged 25 to 64 participating in lifelong learning in the EU. This may be seen as a consequence of the lack of universal, publicly funded programmes aimed at adults who have already completed their formal education (Kryńska, 2007).

On the other, in recent years Poland has seen constant improvement in its the level of education. In 2018, people with a higher education (27,2%) were already the largest group among the various educational stages, and the unemployment rate for people with university diplomas was only 1,6% (Central Statistical Office/Statistical Office in Gdánsk, 2017). In the future, the challenge will be to help adults with a lower secondary, primary or lower education gain a higher level education and employment.

Different countries have taken varying measures for meeting their adult learners' guidance and counselling need. Italy has established so-called Provincial Centers for the Instruction of Adults (CPIAs), which are autonomous educational institutions that oversee adult guidance and counselling in all parts of the country. CPIAs offer programmes that

correspond to basic education, up to the completion of compulsory education, as well as language training courses for immigrants.

Italy saw an increase in the number of learners enrolled in various training courses from 2015-16 to 2016-17. During this time, the figure increased by 18,4% up to 108,539. Similarly, the number of learners from immigrant backgrounds enrolled in level I courses (compulsory education) increased from 12,542 to 14,312 (14,1%) (European Comission, 2023).

CHALLENGES IN GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

The mechanisms which adversely affect learners can be understood as institutional selection and voluntary selection (Nummenmaa & Tarkiainen, 1993). **Institutional selection** refers to situations where learners get left out involuntarily because of circumstances. In Finland, for instance, admission for higher education is very strict, whereas secondary education is compulsory. A significant amount of learners applying for higher education would choose a different programme, if they would not have to worry about admission (Vuorinen & Valkonen).

In contrast, **voluntary selection** refers to a person's own choices and decisions. A lack of motivation or self-confidence, failures in academic performance, mental health problems, a lack of counselling, or insufficient career-management skills, can all discourage a person from applying for jobs or educational programmes (Koivisto & Vuori, 2006).

Self-efficacy and self-esteem are important motivational factors in career-management, as they encourage people to apply for jobs and education. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy refers to one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. This belief plays a major role in how one approaches goals and challenges.

High self-esteem also enhances initiative and fosters experimentation (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs). People with high self-esteem may set higher aspirations than people with low self-esteem. High self-esteem may boost confidence to tackle difficult problems and enable people to get satisfaction from progress and success.

In addition to self-conceptions, learners' understanding of learning and development plays a key role in educational achievement and choices. A growth mindset i.e. the belief that

intelligence is not fixed and can be developed, is a strong predictor of achievement across socioeconomic backgrounds.

Claro, Paunesku & Dweck (2016) found that students from lower-income families were more likely to hold a fixed mindset and avoid challenges and struggles, but those who held a growth mindset were buffered against the effects of poverty on achievement. Structural inequalities can give rise to psychological inequalities that reinforce the impact of structural inequalities on achievement and future opportunities (Claro, Paunesku & Dweck, 2016).

HOPE-CENTRED COMPETENCIES AND CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT

To help in tackling the various challenges outlined above, *Reaching the Star* proposes to make use of the concept of hope-centered guidance and counselling. This concept refers here to the kind of guidance and counselling which focuses on expanding learners' ideas for the future, for instance, by looking at skills and competences which the learners do not yet possess, but which they would like to develop, or by helping them think about career or study paths, which reflect their desires, but which they would otherwise not have considered aiming for.

Using a hope-centred approach to career development creates a positive momentum in the process of career self-management (Niles, Yoon, Balin & Amundson, 2010). Hope-centred competencies are useful across the lifespan as work situations and employment opportunities evolve. The key concepts of hope-based counselling are hopefulness, agency thinking, pathway thinking, goals, self-clarity and personal flexibility (Niles, 2011), whereas the key competences for the learner are hope, self-reflection, self-clarity, visioning, goal setting and planning, implementing and adapting (Niles et al., 2010). From the counsellor's point of view, offering support, encouragement, and guidance helps learners maintain hope that they can implement their identified goals (Niles et al., 2010).

Hopefulness relates to envisioning meaningful goals and believing that positive outcomes are likely to occur from one's actions. A sense of hope allows people to consider different possibilities and encourages them to take action. According to Niles (2011), hopeful thinking consists of three components that are linked together: agency thinking, pathway thinking and goals. Pathway thinking is an important capability that allows one to envision

strategies to achieve a desired goal. Agency thinking on the other hand is needed for motivation and perseverance.

Hope-based visioning is a process that involves brainstorming and listing options for future possibilities, identifying desirable options through self-clarity, and exploring and gathering information to develop in-depth knowledge of them (Niles, 2011). Self-reflection will lead to additional self-clarity, which will in turn lead to determination and commitment.

Self-clarity refers to an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses, whereas personal flexibility or adapting refers to the ability to take on new roles and be able to adapt with change. Many career assessment tools focus on identifying important self-characteristics such as interests and aptitudes, but self-clarity relates to a deeper understanding and a subjective experience of career development (Niles et al, 2010).

Increasing career adaptability resources and abilities to adapt is a central goal in career education and counselling. Personal growth, education and counselling should help a person develop an emotional level certainty and skills to plan and implement life decisions.

According to Savickas and Porfeli (2012), during vocational tasks and occupational transitions an adaptable individual becomes concerned about the vocational future, takes control of trying to prepare for the future, displays curiosity by exploring possible future scenarios and feels confident to pursue aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Sociocultural factors, involuntary institutional selection and voluntary selection, low self-efficacy and low self-esteem, a fixed mindset and lack of hope-centred competences, as well as low career adaptability abilities, can all prevent adult learners from pursuing their aspirations. On the other hand, guidance and counselling can play a significant role in expanding the scale of their visions.

In this project, we aim to help adult learners see their growth potential and all the competences they could develop, instead of simply looking at the skills they already possess. It is equally important to note that, for a variety of reasons, not all dreams can come true even with hard work, which in turn asks for personal flexibility. The project, then,

aims to provide counsellors with the tools for allowing adult learners to reflect on their future, whether they are already in a position to strive towards a clear goal or not.

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