



Finnish University Students' Retrospective Reflections on Transitioning from Upper Secondary Education: Traits of Career Learning

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COLLECTION:
FIND PATHS
THROUGH FUTURE
CHALLENGES

RESEARCH



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ABSTRACT

With support from guidance counselors and teachers, young people are expected to not only acquire the knowledge and skills to handle their future choices of studies and employment but to also take an active role in developing their careers and designing their lives. Finland has been acknowledged as having one of the most professionalized school-based career education systems, with a long tradition of guidance counseling taught in class as a school subject in addition to support provided individually or in groups. A qualified guidance counselor is responsible in both cases. The formal foundation for career education is in place, which sets expectations regarding students' career learning. This article aims at exploring career learning in Finnish general upper secondary education (GUS) through university students' reflections on their experiences of transitioning from GUS to higher education. A pedagogical perspective is applied using the principles of educative teaching as the theoretical approach. The data consist of written career stories produced during the 2022–23 academic year by university students (N = 19) enrolled in specialization studies required to acquire these qualifications as guidance counselors in Finland. The data are interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis. The metaphor of career as a journey is used to generate three themes: (a) the tour guidance paradox, (b) destination is subject to change, and (c) souvenirs are rare. The findings show the informants recognize career development as a lifelong process. To support an individual's career learning process, discussion of a strong pedagogical approach to career education is needed.

ABSTRAKT

Med hjälp och stöd av vägledare och lärare förväntas unga inte bara skaffa sig kunskaper och färdigheter för att hantera sina framtida studie- och yrkesval, utan också aktivt forma sina karriärer och sina liv. Finland är känt för sitt professionaliserade skolbaserade system för karriärvägledning, med en lång tradition av ett schemalagt skolämne som undervisas i klassrummet samt individuell och gruppbaserad elev- och studiehandledning. En behörig studiehandledare ansvarar för båda formerna. Dessa formella grunder för karriärvägledning skapar i sin tur förväntningar på elevernas karriärlärande. Den här artikeln syftar till att utforska karriärlärande genom

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universitetsstuderandes retrospektiva reflektioner över sina erfarenheter av övergången från gymnasieutbildning till högre utbildning. Ett pedagogiskt perspektiv tillämpas med principer för bildande undervisning (*educative teaching*) som teoretisk ansats. Datamaterialet består av karriärberättelser skrivna av universitetsstuderande (N = 19) under läsåret 2022–2023. Studerandena var inskrivna på specialiseringsstudier för att bli behöriga elev- och studiehandledare i Finland. Datamaterialet har analyserats genom reflexiv tematisk analys. Metaforen “karriär som en resa” användes för att skapa tre teman: (a) resan är en vägledningsparadox, (b) destinationen kan förändras och (c) souvenirer är sällsynta. Resultaten visar att informanterna ser karriärutveckling som en livslång process. För att stödja en individs karriärlärandeprocess behövs en diskussion om ett starkt pedagogiskt grepp i karriärvägledning.

INTRODUCTION

Being equipped with the skills to navigate a rapidly changing society and a knowledge-driven labor market is considered essential for young individuals and is critical for a Western nation's competitiveness (European Commission, 2018; European Commission et al., 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). Consequently, the concept of career has become integrated into educational guidelines and policies (e.g. Bakke & Hooley, 2022; Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). Career is “a person's interaction of work roles and other life roles over a person's lifespan, including how they balance paid and unpaid work, and involvement in learning and education” (ELGPN [The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network], 2014). Career management skills (CMS) are defined as “a set of competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) that enable citizens at any age or stage of development to manage their learning and work life paths” (ELGPN, 2015, p. 13). The term *career competencies* also occurs in literature when referring to “the knowledge, skills, and abilities central to career development, which can be influenced and developed by the individual” (Akkermans et al., 2013). Career education includes “programs and activities of learning to help young people develop the skills necessary to manage their careers and life pathways” (ELGPN, 2014).

There is a particular interest among policymakers in how to best prepare young people for a lifelong career (Bimrose & Brown, 2015; Dodd et al., 2022). Research on policy and the organization of career education (e.g. Draaisma et al., 2017; Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019; Hooley et al., 2024; Kettunen, 2024; Sultana, 2012) not only compares models but also discusses the significance of career education at the societal level. Research on the impact of various interventions in career education (e.g. Hughes et al., 2016; Mackay et al., 2016; Mann et al., 2020; Røise, 2022a) shows positive educational, economic, and social outcomes.

The organization and implementation of career education programs and activities differ across various countries. Sultana (2012) identified four alternative models for career education in the school context: (a) having a specific school subject, (b) having career competence as part of the curricula in all subjects, (c) engaging in extracurricular activities, and (d) having a combination of the three aforementioned alternatives. In Finland, which is the context of this study and where the fourth model is applied, guidance counseling is realized both in the form of counseling individually or in groups and as a mandatory school subject that is included in the curriculum. Time is allocated to classroom teaching in both compulsory education in Grades 7–9 and in Finnish general upper secondary education (GUS). Both forms are the responsibility of a professional guidance counselor. In this article, *guidance counseling* and career education are considered the same because of the educational approach to guidance counseling in the school context (Guichard, 2001).

Savickas (2015) identified three paradigms in guidance counseling: guiding, developing, and designing. Although the three exist side by side, the individual's *career learning* would be placed in the developing paradigm (Haug, 2016), with a focus on the lifelong process of learning to handle many decisions, constant changes, and various roles throughout the life course (Savickas, 2015; Super, 1980). Based on this developing approach, career learning is a holistic process. It includes not only learning about education and work but also self-knowledge and consideration of how one wants to live one's life (Skovhus, 2018). Lifelong learning has long

been the foundation for personal development in the OECD countries (Biesta & Adair, 2011) and is one of the learning goals in the Finnish curriculum in both compulsory school and GUS (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, 2020).

Much of the previous research in the domain of career learning is focused on *what* to learn. Wijers and Meijers (1996) highlighted that career learning has three tasks: to (a) form an identity, (b) determine a direction, and (c) plan a career and steer oneself toward it. The so-called DOTS model (Law, 1999)—decision learning, opportunity awareness, transition learning, and self-awareness—is often used as the base for what the individual should learn (Haug, 2023; Lundahl et al., 2020; Vuorinen et al., 2023). Many countries have a blueprint for which career management skills or competence to learn (Hooley et al., 2013; Sultana, 2012).

Studies on *how* to learn show that writing career portfolios is fruitful for the process of learning if used in combination with career discussions (e.g. Mann et al., 2020; Sultana, 2013). Career activities connected to reflections are considered beneficial (e.g. Reid et al., 2016; Røise, 2022c; Savickas, 2016), although some studies show modest or no evidence of the effect of reflections (Lengelle et al., 2013, 2016). Support from both professionals and significant others is important and can help rectify poor learning outcomes (Barnes & Brown, 2016).

Career learning in the school context is formal but can also occur informally both inside and outside school (Mackay et al., 2016; Thomsen, 2014). The intentional influence of career education does not necessarily lead to intended learning (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Patton & McMahon, 2021). Life experience is often a source of unintentional learning. The role of formal career education is therefore to provide opportunities for intentional career learning and to help individuals make sense of their experiences (Patton & McMahon, 2021).

Despite many similarities and shared values in the Nordic countries there are differences in how career education is implemented (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Haug et al., 2020). In a Danish context scholars have highlighted that career activities should be focused more on the process of growing as a person than only on decision-making (Poulsen, 2020; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020). In a Norwegian context Røise (2022b) found a didactic irrationality in career education and therefore argued for strong pedagogic professionalism among practitioners. In Finland the formal foundation for career learning is in place with guidance counseling enforced by law, guidance counselors being part of the teaching staff in schools and core curricula in both compulsory education and GUS traditionally emphasizing a holistic approach to lifelong learning and guidance (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016, 2020; Kettunen, 2024; Opetushallitus, 2003, 2016; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020). The long tradition aiming at students' development of both self-knowledge and ability for decision-making to handle transition to further studies and future working life sets expectations on learning outcomes. With this background it is alarming that the optional education career component of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), in which Finland took part in 2012 and 2018, shows that Finnish students in compulsory education 2018 have declining development in career management skills compared to 2012, despite more emphasis on the theme in the national core curriculum (Vuorinen et al., 2021). The context for this article is GUS in Finland but the declining development in career competence in compulsory school is problematic as GUS is a continuation of compulsory education. The systemic approach to guidance counseling in Finland is highly recognized (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Hooley et al., 2024; Kettunen, 2024). Guidance counseling has a tradition of pastoral care and supervision but there seems to be room for development on the attention to actual learning outcomes (Marjokorpi, 2022). Pekkari (2006) found that career and life planning received little attention in Finnish GUS. There is a need for more research on the career learners' perspective to understand how the learning goals of career education can be realized in practice (Kettunen, 2024). This study contributes to the growing research interest in the individual's actual career learning process as a result of career education by giving voice to the career learners.

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study is to explore career learning in Finnish GUS education. The research questions are: (a) How do university students retrospectively reflect on their experiences of transitioning from general upper secondary education? (b) What traits of career learning can be found in the university students' retrospective reflections?

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This article investigates career education and learning through a pedagogical lens rather than from a psychological or social perspective. This approach is a spin-off from the suggestion that career development theory should be combined with learning theory (e.g. [Haug, 2023](#); [Patton & McMahon, 2021](#)). Rucker's (2023) writing on educative teaching has therefore been chosen as a theoretical approach to understanding what career learning appears to be in the studied context and its implications for career education and guidance counseling practice.

Educative teaching is rooted in Herbart's German educational theory tradition ([Lin, 2023](#)) in which the student's personal development is an important aim of education ([Uljens, 2002](#)). The learner him/herself is actively doing the learning ([Uljens, 2023](#)). Rucker (2020) argued that teaching that is restricted to providing the learner with valuable content is insufficient. If what is being taught is to lead to learning, the student must react to the taught content with self-activity. The selected teaching content should be relevant to the student's present and prospective life ([Rucker, 2020](#)). The learner needs to be given the opportunity to react to what is being taught to develop their own value judgment and learn to act accordingly. Therefore, education should not solely be guarding or preventing the learner from making mistakes (discipline), nor should it entail only passing on knowledge to the learner (teaching). Education should be guidance and should help learners search for, find, and develop their own way of life. Educative teaching does not exclude the learner's acquisition of knowledge, but the knowledge needs to be evaluated through the learner's considerations of "what is a good life for me" and "what value does this knowledge have for me"; otherwise, teaching is incomplete ([Rucker, 2023, p. 68](#)). This interplay between teacher, student, and content is a fundamental aspect of the learning process.

METHOD

The qualitative study was conducted with a hermeneutic approach, where the source of knowledge is the understanding and interpretation of individual experience ([Heikkinen et al., 2005](#); [Ödman, 2007](#); [Westlund, 2019](#)).

The study was inspired by a narrative method used in guidance counseling to help the informants see and understand their experiences. Research on lived experiences can only be interpretations based on the informant's own interpretations of experiences and this article can therefore only tell *one* story ([Van Manen, 2016](#)). With the retrospective perspective the narrative may be reconstructed, but the informants' multiple ways of understanding and interpreting their own experiences ([Del Corso & Rehfuß, 2011](#); [Savickas, 2012](#); [Savickas et al., 2009](#)) was considered to give an important and authentic perspective on the process.

Qualitative research is based on assumptions about the investigated reality ([Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). The first author of this article had a double role of researcher/course instructor in the studied context and a solid experience of practice as a guidance counselor in GUS school. This preknowledge is present and used as an asset in the interpretations ([Dowling, 2006](#); [Maxwell et al., 2020](#)). The second and third authors, who have participated actively in processing the data, had no relation to the informants nor context. Potential biases have been addressed through reflexive discussions ([Olmos-Vega et al., 2023](#)).

INFORMANTS

The data were collected during the 2022–23 academic year among university students participating in a course in the specialization studies to become qualified guidance counselors as a complement to their major exam. Of the 30 university students enrolled in the course, 19 gave informed consent to participate in the study. University students who worked as guidance counselors alongside their studies were not included in the study so as to avoid conflicting roles.

The informants' major study programs were Teaching and Learning (class teaching, special education, and early childhood education), Pedagogy or Educational Leadership, Social Sciences (development psychology), and Health Science. None of the informants had completed their practical training units as guidance counselors.

Prior to enrolling in their current university studies, the informants graduated between 1990 and 2021 from 12 different rural and urban GUS schools of different sizes located in four different Swedish-speaking regions in Finland. The language of instruction in GUS in Finland is either Finnish or Swedish, and the curricula in both languages are identical. Therefore, this demarcation is considered functional.

DATA COLLECTION

As an element of the course of the specialization studies, the university students were given a written assignment designed as a retrospective reflection. They were asked to reflect on the given topic their career journeys between GUS and their current university studies. Referring to career as a journey is a well-established metaphor in careers literature ([Sawad, 2005](#)), and the students were familiar with the definition of career as an individual's path through life ([ELGPN, 2014](#); [Thomsen, 2014](#)). The assignment was given before career development theories were introduced in the study course. The assignment had been used in previous student groups to initiate discussions on individuals' various career development paths. The first author of this article, being the course instructor, had noticed that these written reflections were thorough rather than superficial and descriptive ([Veine et al., 2020](#)). This piloting justified the use of the assignment as the method for data collection.

The following instructions (Appendix) were given for the task:

Recall your time in GUS and reflect on your career journey from then to where you are now. Describe how at this age you thought about the choices you had ahead, what affected your choices, what support you received or would have needed, and how your choices turned out. What competencies did you gain from GUS to handle your future, and what are your thoughts on your career today?

You can use the attached picture for inspiration if you want to.

The written instructions included directed prompts to help the university students reflect. Without directed prompting reflections can be insufficient and descriptive ([Davis, 2000, 2003](#)). Given the risk of excessive influence, the words *choice* and *support* were used to promote reflections on the theme guidance counseling rather than life and school in general. The picture was not explained in any form for those who preferred a free interpretation of the task. It is important that individuals feel they have a choice when reflecting ([Denton, 2018](#)). It was further assumed that the term career learning would be difficult to grasp for the university students. Therefore, the instructions encouraged to reflect on gained competences instead of learning.

The university students were encouraged to write two to four A4 pages, and the texts were handed in electronically to the course instructor. The assignment was not evaluated in any form. The data consisted of 36 A4 pages of written text.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) ([Braun & Clarke, 2021b, 2022](#)). Braun and Clarke ([2021a](#)) argued that thematic analysis is a family of approaches with some common characteristics but also differences in research value, design, and analysis. In RTA, coding is seen as an organic process to generate themes of shared meaning across the dataset. The researcher takes an active, reflexive role in the process, and preknowledge is used as an asset. RTA involves immersion in the data and interpretation of the expressed (and unspoken) experiences. Braun and Clarke ([2021b, 2022](#)) described the analytic process as having six phases: (a) dataset familiarization; (b) data coding; (c) initial theme generation; (d) theme development and review; (e) theme refining, defining, and naming; and (f) writing up. The researcher is creative and generates themes to shape meaning and tell a story.

An initial read-through of the written career stories was conducted by Researcher 1 without making any notes (phase 1). Informants were named "Uni" 1–19. The texts were then imported as 19 separate cases into the data analysis program NVivo for coding. The first coding (phase 2) was driven by the topics given in the instructions for the assignment—support, decision

made, thoughts, and the future—mainly with the aim of organizing the data. Analyzing the 19 cases separately hindered the interpretive aspirations and thorough immersion of Researcher 1 in the dataset. A second coding was done with the 19 cases included in one file. The codes were extracted from NVivo into an Excel spreadsheet, which proved to be the best tool for obtaining an overview of this relatively small dataset. The main analysis was conducted using the spreadsheet. An interpretative approach was used to develop the codes (phases 3 and 4) into initial themes, guided by the central idea in RTA that a theme should differ from a topic summary (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 76–78). The themes do not cover all that is said but were chosen to express a certain shared meaning in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 88–89). This inductive process resulted in three final themes, which were discussed by all three researchers, redefined several times and finalized (phases 5 and 6). Table 1 shows an example of development of analysis from topics to the final theme 1: The tour guidance paradox.

DATA	TOPIC	CODE	INITIAL THEMES	FINAL THEME
'I am very grateful for the support from home. I have always had the possibility to do what I have liked and have not felt any larger pressure to be anything. I have had good advice and support financially and mentally.' (uni 6)	Support	Family important	The guided tour	
'During the conversation, the guidance counselor also asked me if I had considered other options because it is good to apply for several programs.' (uni 8)	Support	Widening of alternatives	The guided tour	The tour guidance paradox
'The guidance counselor had made a case for Åbo Akademi University and I got the impression that it was the only option for us.' (uni 13)	Support	No alternatives	The charter tour	
'When it was time to apply to universities, it was my mother who suggested teacher studies to me.' (uni 9)	Support	No alternatives	The charter tour	
'One thing I remember clearly was when I had a conversation with my counselor was that (s)he started asking questions very quickly and kind of trying to push a choice out of me.' (uni 7)	Support	Guided but pressure	The guided tour can be a lonely ride	
'We probably had conversations with a guidance counselor and did some form of career choice tests but have no memory of them. Have no memory of feeling any kind of support from a guidance counselor or teacher either.' (uni 3)	Support	Bad experience	The guided tour can be a lonely ride	
'I remember that one day after school I googled different programs [...] Then suddenly I found the health sciences program [...] As soon as I read about the program, it felt right[...] My guidance counselor had never heard of this program[...]' (uni 17)	Support	I have managed on my own	The lonely ride	

Table 1 Example of development of analysis from topics to the final theme 1: The tour guidance paradox.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The university students who gave informed consent to participate could withdraw from the study at any point. Informants were in control of what information to share. All data was securely stored following university recommendations and will be deleted after completion of the study.

As the context was limited to Swedish-speaking Finland and the informants were all enrolled in a specific study program at one university, no further background information about the informants is provided to protect their confidentiality. All identifying information of the informants was removed at an early stage of the research process to keep first author distanced

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three themes: (a) *the tour guidance paradox*, (b) *destination is subject to change*, and (c) *souvenirs are rare*. The themes are illustrated by data excerpts.

The informants are named “Uni,” followed by a given number in excerpts with no further information to protect their identity. Excerpts in Swedish were translated to English with the help of the free version of the DeepL AI tool. Words omitted due to irrelevance are marked with [...] in the in excerpts.

THE TOUR GUIDANCE PARADOX

The informants were instructed to recall their transition from GUS to higher education and to reflect on their choices and the support that they received.

The first theme, *the tour guidance paradox*, was generated to capture how support is not reflected on as either good or bad but turns out to have a dual nature from the retrospective perspective. It was expected that strong support would be recalled as a positive experience and weak support as a negative one. Some informants naturally expressed gratitude and appreciation for valuable discussions, whereas others recalled a subjective feeling of being left alone. However, the informants retrospectively also saw how strong support was not necessarily for the best and that weak support could generate action.

Being supported and accompanied by the guidance counselor or teacher made the journey comfortable in the moment. The individuals’ reflections expressed their gratitude, relief, and appreciation for being directed toward a path that they were unable to see then. When support was focused on learning to recognize one’s own capabilities and widening the options, the individual learned how to tackle similar situations in the future:

A big thanks goes to my former guidance counselor in upper secondary, who emphasized my interest in society and helped me see my strengths in different subjects. (Uni 11)

Support with a clear pedagogical approach turned into a learning situation in which the individual was not only active but also learned methods to use in the future:

Based on my answers, she drew a mind map of my study options, organized according to what I had told her I liked most. I liked this method very much as it visualized my thoughts and gave me something concrete to take home and look at. (Uni 10)

Support from guidance professionals, teachers, and family was appreciated and reflected upon as important. Family members, especially the mother, were mentioned in several reflections. However, strong support sometimes functioned as a travel agent who took control of what resembled a charter journey. When support turned into strong recommendations, there was little room for career learning:

When it was time to send in applications to universities, it was my mom who suggested teaching. (Uni 9)

The guidance counselor had made a case for Åbo Akademi University, and I got the impression that it was the only option for us. (Uni 13)

It is natural that inadequate support was recalled as a negative experience. Knowing how guidance counseling is formally organized in Finnish GUS, we must not assume that no support was provided. Nevertheless, some reflections described the feeling of a lonely ride, with more information, more knowledge, and a last push forward being desired:

We probably had conversations with a guidance counselor and did some form of career choice tests, but [I] have no memory of them. [I] have no memory of feeling any kind of support from a guidance counselor or teacher either. (Uni 3)

The paradox is that even though support was important and appreciated, very strong support retrospectively appeared to cause doubts of agency, whereas weak support generated self-activity, which is an important factor in a learning process. Looking back, the well-supported informants seemed to doubt whether the choices were their own or driven by someone else. This doubt regarding agency in career decisions was visible not only when the informants realized that their choices had been based on other people's will but also when the career journey was mapped out early based on the individual's experience with, for example, family members' jobs or by others' strong and early reinforcement of what would be a suitable option:

My choices have many times been uncertain and based on what others have done.
(Uni 14)

I remember I was often told by family, relatives, and friends that I would be a good teacher and that this was something they could see me working as. I think this had a strong influence on me and partly resulted in my never really considering any other alternatives. (Uni 8)

Conversely, lack of support was a negative experience but generated efforts to take control in the cases in this study. This self-activity and development of independence were valuable lessons for life and true signs of career learning:

I remember that one day after school, I googled different programs [...] Then suddenly, I found the health sciences program [...] As soon as I read about the program, it felt right[...] My guidance counselor had never heard of this program. (Uni 17)

Retrospectively, the informants saw what they would have needed in terms of support. If the route was mapped out too early, the learner had no opportunity to train the ability to analyze and organize information and to deeply reflect on alternatives, which are important career learning elements. The feeling of being unsupported was an unpleasant experience, but if it generated self-activity, it could lead to career learning:

I had very weak guidance for further education in upper secondary. I had high ambitions but no real plan for how to follow my ambitions. [...] In the end, it's a good thing I didn't get the guidance I needed since I had the possibility to figure out the processes myself and investigate different study options, which gave me a good basis for my future profession. (Uni 16)

DESTINATION IS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

When the informants reflected on their decisions for their future, the shared meaning in the data was that choices made in GUS were not final.

At this level of education, a choice of profession had theoretically been made, as all informants were enrolled in a university program, but they still wondered whether there might have been—or still were—more suitable alternatives. When the first theme includes doubt regarding ownership in decision-making, this second theme, *Destination is subject to change*, suggests that there is doubt regarding whether decisions and choices made in GUS were thoroughly considered. A fear of missed opportunities was obvious:

But I am still not certain about my choice of program, and sometimes I wonder if there would have been something more suitable for me. (Uni 15)

Many had a different destination in mind after graduating from GUS but, for some reason, had to settle for plan B. This caused a feeling of failure in the moment, but reflecting on the situation after some time passed, they recognized that it turned out for the best. Adjustment or acceptance seemed to be possible:

The day we received the results of admissions, I felt like a failure. I was admitted to [the program], but this was not what I wanted. I however accepted the offer, and gradually, it also started feeling quite okay. [This program] was the best that ever happened to me. I have liked it very much, and I'm so happy it turned out this way.
(Uni 2)

Choosing a future path in GUS was recalled as a stressful task to complete. The informants adopted a long-term perspective toward the process, rather than viewing decision-making as a one-time event. Many also expressed that there was still time to decide.

Sometimes, I still question my choices—if I'm in the “right” field. At the same time, I think this is something you will never really know. The most important is that you start somewhere, with something that interests you... (Uni 14)

The interpretation of this can be twofold. Either they have not learned how to handle decisions and have therefore left them open, or the informants do not see decisions as final because they recognize that many will be made during their lifetimes. If the latter, it is a trait of career learning, but the insight seems to have come with time passed rather than from intentional learning.

SOUVENIRS ARE RARE

The informants were asked to reflect on the competences that they gained from GUS. The third theme, *Souvenirs are rare*, captures how difficult it is to identify career competence—that is, what the learner brings from a career journey to use in the future. The informants appeared to interpret competence as practical skills needed for further education, such as time management, study techniques, and work discipline:

In GUS, I got several competences that I still find useful. I have, among other things, found a study technique that works for me. (Uni 16)

GUS was described as an important time for the maturing process, which entailed a certain self-knowledge. Handling stress, accepting changes, and coping with the unpredictable were mentioned as useful life lessons. This kind of competence is valuable in a lifelong career but stems from the experience of challenges rather than intentional learning of career skills:

I got to experience that some choices are more important than others and that I need to make my own decisions—no one else—when it comes to my future. One might have to make some mistakes to get (back) on the right track. (Uni 5)

This theme also captures the unsaid in the data material. There are not many traits of learning about working life or the labor market in school, contrary to what was expected considering the formal foundations for this. Some reflections concern learning from summer jobs, but this is also related to decision-making regarding higher education rather than learned competence that is valuable in future occupations. The same applies to visits to universities; they are appreciated but again focused on the choice of further education.

DISCUSSION

THE INDIVIDUAL'S CAREER-LEARNING PROCESS

This study aligns with a lifelong development approach to the individual's career journey (Savickas, 2015; Super, 1980). All career stories in the study recognize that the questions “Who am I?” and “What is my place in life?” are as present in higher education as they are in the younger years. The informants are also prepared to continue this process after graduating from higher education, seeing lifelong learning not only as an opportunity but also as expected of them. Lifelong learning has been regarded by the OECD as a key factor for handling a lifelong career, but the focus is on learning to be *productive and employable* rather than learning to be, which was the original idea of UNESCO (Biesta & Adair, 2011). The career learners in our study show traits of career learning connected to a process that Danish researchers have described as becoming *someone* rather than *something* (Poulsen et al., 2016; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020). Recognizing lifelong personal development whereby reoccurring changes of plan is a natural part of the process is a traditional learning goal in the Finnish national core curriculum of GUS (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020; Opetushallitus, 2016). This approach to career learning seems to comfort and give the career learner hope for the future.

Guidance counseling in this study appears to be one-on-one discussions and focused on what Pekkari (2006) identified in a similar context as school-to-school guidance counseling, with less focus on learning to handle a lifelong career. Decision-making is indeed an important area of career learning (Law, 1999; Wijers & Meijers, 1996) but only one. The findings in the present study indicate that the individual's feeling of agency can be lost if solving the choice problem is the primary focus. Unchallenged decisions may result in a fear of missed opportunities (Patton & McMahon, 2021), which this study shows is a recurring issue many years after a choice is made. While support is undoubtedly important and appreciated, striking the optimal balance between an appropriate level of presence and the type of support is a delicate matter. This study does show traits of career learning, such as learning to see more options, but it seems to be hidden behind the urge to find a solution for the choice of further education.

The long tradition of the formal structured organization of guidance counseling in the Finnish school setting (Kettunen, 2024; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020) provides opportunities for what Patton and McMahon (2021) would identify as intentional career learning. The findings in this study, however, show more traits of unintentional career learning, which is more connected to overall maturity, rather than intentional career learning. Group activities, which have proven to have a positive impact on career learning (Mackay et al., 2016), seem to have had no memorable impact on the informants. It must be acknowledged that most of the informants matriculated following a curriculum for which only one of two study modules were obligatory, but group activities were invisible in the reflections. The reason might be that group activities were not directly prompted for in the instructions for in data collection. However, given the significant time and resources dedicated to scheduled classroom teaching in guidance counseling in Finland, this deficiency is concerning. Vuorinen et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of participation in various activities, as absence from classroom teaching in guidance counseling was identified as one factor connected to weak CMS in the PISA 2018 evaluation. We therefore initiate a discussion on a strong pedagogical approach to career education with learning as the focus in this article.

A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO CAREER EDUCATION

We find the principles of educative teaching (Rucker, 2020, 2023) useful as a model for understanding what career education needs to be if career learning is the goal. The lifelong process of becoming someone rather than something (Poulsen, 2020; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020) is in line with the fundamentals of educative teaching, in which the development of the individual as a person is the aim (Uljens, 2023). The lifelong learning approach is also visible in both the current and older versions of the Finnish core curriculum of GUS (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020; Opetushallitus, 2016). In educative teaching learning is the result of the interaction between teacher, learner, and content (Rucker, 2023). Our study findings imply that in the interaction between learner and guidance counselor, the focus is on finding a solution to a choice of further education, whereas the learners seem to be given few opportunities to react to and evaluate the process, which in educative teaching is one important activity if learning is to take place (Rucker, 2023). The learner should also be given the opportunity to react to and evaluate the content taught. In our findings, content taught in class is not mentioned; this is possibly because it was not specifically requested for when collecting the data. However, content is also information given by the guidance counselor (or parent). The findings imply that the learners, when retrospectively given the possibility to reflect, they evaluated and reevaluated their process. Previous research on career learning supports the importance of reflecting (Reid et al., 2016; Røise, 2022c; Savickas, 2016), which is an example of self-activity and in educative teaching the key to learning.

Education should not involve only guarding or preventing the learner from making mistakes (discipline), nor should it entail only passing knowledge on to the learner (teaching); rather, it should involve guidance and helping the learner search for, find, and develop their own way of life (Rucker, 2023). Considering the findings in the present study, guidance counseling resembles what educative teaching would identify as discipline—that is, helping learners avoid mistakes. Support from family members also appears to fall into this category. This may not be enough if a learning process is the goal.

LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

While the strength of this study lies in the career learners' voices it must be acknowledged that the informants studying to become guidance counselors in a specific context are a limited group. The informants were already professionally tuned in to the work of guidance counseling and can therefore only represent one perspective. However, informants' preknowledge was regarded as an asset in terms of interest in and preparedness to reflect on the theme investigated. The study's retrospective perspective provided mature reflections but is limited by the fact that most of the informants graduated following an older version of the national core curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2003, 2016). Therefore, conclusions on how career learning goals of the current core curriculum are met cannot be made. More research on how students attending GUS experience their career learning is needed.

The design of data collection has its limitations. A semi-structured interview would have provided more opportunities for follow-up questions. Conclusions on career learning must therefore be regarded as the researchers' interpretations of the reflections.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article aimed at exploring career learning in Finnish GUS through university students' retrospective reflections on their transitioning from GUS to higher education. The findings support that career learning is a lifelong process of personal development rather than one of acquiring specific competencies. Self-activity is an important element.

Using educative teaching as an approach would suggest that career education is pedagogically approached in the same way as any other school subject. Thoughtfully considered teaching content and activities that develop the learner's ability to evaluate (Rucker, 2023) go beyond providing information. The current national core curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020) has such intentions but may challenge the guidance counselor's professional role. Marjokorpi (2022) called for development of professionals' expertise aiming at students' personal learning process to challenge the strong tradition of pastoral care in Finland. Acknowledging career education as the guidance counselor's special field of expertise in both training and practice could be one way to promote actual learning outcomes.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Instructions given for course task. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.97.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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The first author collected and analyzed the data and drafted the manuscript, with important contributions from the other authors as supervisors. All the authors discussed and accepted the analysis and final draft of the manuscript.

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