Critical perspectives on agency and social justice in transitions and career development

Abstract

Type of contribution

Paper

Title

Situated inequality in career guidance in schools

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Abstract and 3 – 5 keywords (up to 150 words)

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Irving argues that in academic literature there has been a healthy debate on social justice and the relationship with career construction and learning, but very little seems to have changed at a practice level (Irving, 2011, p. 29) and career practitioners are not familiar with the concept (Irving, 2015). If focus on social justice shall lead to changes in practice, it becomes important and a major task to operationalize social justice into guidance practices (McMahon, Arthur, & Collins, 2008, p. 22). Hooley emphasizes that practitioners are right in pointing out that despite growing interest in this area, we still need to answer the question ‘what is to be done?’ (Hooley, 2015, p. 13).

The issue of social justice is complex and it is important that professionals continuously reflect on and discuss how their actions in everyday practice at an individual, organizational and community level contribute to or reduce social justice. This requires insight into how social justice issues can play out in the practice of everyday life. The presentation gives insight into two cases - a case on a parents meeting in the school and a case on career guidance of a student called Thomas. Using Højholt’s theory of situated inequality (Højholt, 2016), it is discussed how inequality can play out in guidance and teaching in different and often subtle ways and how it is linked to the many structural oppositions that characterise the field of career guidance. The analysis suggests that inequalities are rife, e.g. even in the questions posed to the students who are assessed not ready for education, and in the meaning ascribed to their answers.

The analysis indicate that social practice in guidance and teaching unintentionally and unnoticed can create unequal conditions for different students (Skovhus, 2018).
Relation to the conference theme (up to 50 words)
The analysis relates to the conference theme since it provides insight into how different problems related to social justice are produced or meet in the everyday practice of career guidance in relation to student’s transitions from lower secondary school to the vocational or academic route. This indicate how social practice can have an impact on the students self-understanding and development of understanding of his or her opportunities in the society – which relates to the students development of agency.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework (up to 600 words)
The theoretical framework for the research is Danish-German critical psychology, which sets out to conduct research from a first-person perspective. Critical psychology particularly emphasizes subjective participation in practice (Mørck, 2006). From this outset, the work is inspired by social practice theory concerning human agency, practice, community, horizons for actions, meaning, intentions, reasons for action and everyday conduct of life. This theoretical approach was chosen out of a desire to study career guidance and career education from a participant perspective and include structural conditions in the analysis. Through a first-person perspective on young people’s and career professional’s personal experiences of concrete dilemmas in practice and an investigation of personal meaning-making processes, it is possible to learn about social structures and conditions related to these experiences (Højholt & Kousholt, 2009; Holzkamp, 2013, p. 275).

In relation to social justice I include the term situated inequality (Højholt, 2016). Højholt argues that every day practice has to be analysed as situated and that it is important to point to the situated inequality in the classroom instead of displacing the conflicts in and about the school – and career guidance – to abstract concepts, e.g. social background. ‘The school not only measures differences, but constitutes differences’ (Højholt, 2016).

Research questions
- How does career guidance and career education play out in lower secondary school (Danish grades 7-9/10, ages 14-16/17) in interaction with the school and structural conditions?
- How is youth career guidance meaningful to the students?

Methods/methodology (up to 300 words)
The methods used for the empirical research were participant observation and situated conversations with lower secondary students, career guidance practitioners, and teachers. In addition, selected students were interviewed. The fieldwork was carried out on days spread throughout a school year and in relation to guidance activities arranged for the students, either by guidance practitioners or teachers, including individual guidance interviews. Empirical data was also collected during lessons and breaks.

Outcomes/ expected results (up to 200 words)
The analysis sparks a discussion on social justice aspects related to career guidance in lower secondary school and in educational programmes. It indicate that the social practice in career guidance unintentionally can create unequal conditions for students. This highlight that it is important to discuss questions like: How are activities in career guidance organized to expanding horizons? How can career guidance create other opportunities for students than the ones that reproduces e.g. class and gender?
References


