Articulating the ‘official truth’ on guidance and counselling in post-comprehensive educational transitions: A documentary analysis on Finnish national core curricula 1971–2016

Janne Varjo, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, janne.varjo@helsinki.fi
Mira Kalalahti, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, mira.kalalahti@helsinki.fi

Keywords: Guidance and counselling, national core curriculum, governance of educational transitions, education policy

Abstract

Relation to the conference theme

Attachment to education, delayed continuation to post-comprehensive education, as well as high numbers of drop-outs and late transition to working life commonly are recognised as major problems within political debates. Despite their societal importance, studies on the governance of educational transitions is understudied field of educational research.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

According to Walther (2006), the complex systems of socioeconomic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns that form the structure of the journey from youth to adulthood can be understood as transition regimes. Drawing on the work of Esping-Andersen (1990), the notion of regime relates to “existing institutional settings that have a history structured not only by conflicts and interests of specific social actors but also by the set of values and interpretations which they constantly reproduce” (Walther 2006, 124).

A universalistic transition regime is characterised by an extended public sector and a wide variety of counselling and activation policies, traditionally typical for the Nordic countries. Systems of guidance and counselling are indeed connected to the idea of universalist Nordic welfare state model and the governance of public institutions. (Pohl & Walther 2007.) Nevertheless, due to common trends of decentralisation and marketisation, the Nordic countries also show evidence of increasing social and ethnic divisions (Lundahl 2016). According to Kananen (2011), as a contrast to widely used political rhetoric, the foundation of the new order has not solely been the ideas of individual freedom or choice. Instead, the most important aim appears to have been to control and direct people to act in accordance with the rules of the market.

In Finland, guidance and counselling are institutionalised firmly into all levels and sectors of education system. The students have a legal right to specified time allocations for guidance and counselling services at educational institutions, which are in most cases governed by the
municipalities (N = 311). The national core curricula are drawn up by the Finnish National Agency for Education. In general, they include the objectives and core contents of the various subjects, as well as the principles of pupil assessment, special-needs education, pupil welfare and educational guidance. The principles of a good learning environment, working approaches and as the concept of learning are also addressed in the core curricula. In terms of our analysis, they also set the official aims for the guidance and counselling concerning on educational transitions.

In order to portray the governance of guidance and counselling in post-comprehensive educational transitions in Finland, we analyse what kind of aims have been stated for guidance and counselling in national core curricula for basic education 1971–2016. We ask: 1) What kinds knowledge, skills and attitudes guidance and counselling is obliged to provide? 2) How these aims have altered in the course of time? 3) What is the underlying rationale?

Methods/methodology

The data consists of national core curricula from the years 1971, 1985, 1994, 2004 and 2016. Jointly, they cover the whole period since the Finnish comprehensive school reform (1971–1977). According to Simola (2015), education policy documents, such as the curriculum, include serious authoritative verbal acts of experts who speak as such and who thereby express the ‘official truth’ on schooling – and the educational transitions involved. They are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, 49).

Bourdieu (1977; see also Simola 2015) uses the concepts of doxa, orthodoxy and heterodoxy in analysing the production, reproduction and transformation of discourse and its limits in social formations. At a given historical moment, they form heterodoxy, a field of possible opinions. Some actors aim to establish orthodoxy: to legitimate their view as the truth of educational transition, for example. Outside the monolith orthodoxy and the multi-voiced heterodoxy exists doxa, the universe of the undiscussed or undisputed. Doxa represents the prevailing symbolic order and the ‘natural’ state of affairs that we take for granted (Bourdieu 1977; see also Simola 2015). In bourdieusian terms, curricular documents articulate the orthodoxy of guidance and counselling in post-comprehensive educational transitions.

Whilst setting the official aims for the guidance and counselling, the national core curricula reflects the contemporary objectives and principles of educational transitions. The documentary analysis focusing on these changing objectives, aims and rationale is made as an iterative process, combining elements of content analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen 2009).

Outcomes/ expected results

Finland has placed career management skills high on its policy agenda throughout the whole comprehensive school era 1971 onwards. The underlying rationales are simultaneously both economic-competitive and social. The overall aim is to promote the employability of young people, and to increase their self-empowerment and self-assessment so that they are able to make well-considered decisions about their education and careers throughout their lives. Despite common objectives, actual contents for guidance and counselling have altered along the general trends of education and social policies.

References


