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The Narrative Quality of Career Conversations in Vocational Education

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SPECIAL SECTION

The Narrative Quality of Career Conversations in Vocational Education

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Due to the individualization of society and the rise of a service economy, youngsters have to develop a career identity. In this article we explore to what extent career guidance conversations in vocational education enable the development of a career identity. Using core concepts of dialogical self theory, we understand identity development in terms of positioning: as a dynamic process from I-positions to a meta-position and subsequently to a promoter-position. We want to know what happens when in a conversation an I-position is formulated. Based on 30 guidance conversations between students

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and a teacher or workplace mentor, four different strategies of teachers or mentors are distinguished: ignoring the I-position, repositioning by talking on behalf of the student, broadening the I-position without conclusion, and dialogue resulting in the formulation of a promoter-position. The results show that dialogical self theory can support teachers and mentors in broadening their positioning repertoire to improve the narrative quality of their guidance conversations with students.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the future of many youngsters is uncertain. “Grand narratives” that gave identity and direction in life have disappeared, leaving youngsters (and many adults) with the challenge to give meaning to their lives themselves. Careers do not develop within clear boundaries anymore and are, therefore, to a large extent unpredictable. At the same time, however, youngsters are expected to be intrinsically motivated when they enter the labor market, because the personalities of employees in a service economy are becoming an increasingly important production factor (Sennett, 1998). In order to deal with the effects of the individualization of society, the emergence of an unpredictable career, and the growing emotionalization of work, youngsters have to develop a career identity (Savickas et al., 2010). Career identity can be defined as a story told by a person, expressing his or her life theme(s) and the way he or she identifies the self based on these life theme(s) with a specific occupation or career (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Life themes provide the unity in life (hi)stories and can be viewed as “an existing and enduring orientation that guides interpretation and action” (Cochran, 1997, p. 60). A career story helps one define who one is and how one should act in the changing career context, by giving meaning and direction (Wijers & Meijers, 1996).

In a rapidly changing society, career stories that help youngsters find their way in the labor market and in society cannot be transferred from one generation to another. Central to our argument is that career stories—and a career identity that is based on these stories—can only be developed when its episodes are tested by reality constantly; and the only way to do this is by telling the story to relevant others. As Bakhtin (1981, p. 345) put it succinctly: “[T]he internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s.” From this point of view, identity is actually a kind of “polyphonic novel”—a combination of various voices embodied in one person (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). “As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective *Me*’s and their world, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self” (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992, pp. 28–29).

Identity, therefore, is not static but inherently transformed by the exchanges among I-positions (internal dialogue with ourselves) or with other individuals (external dialogue). It is noteworthy that internal and external dialogues are only separate in the way we conceptualize them; in practice, they inform each other in an ongoing way—they are, in fact merged. People are motivated to engage in internal and external dialogues because each dialogue satisfies one of two core human needs: a “sense of autonomy and control” and “being part of a wider community.” To be happy we must feel in balance with ourselves and be connected with others. A career identity therefore is coconstructed, socially situated, and performed in interactions. According to Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010) this coconstruction is a practice of positioning, whereby “master narratives” (Davies & Harré, 1990) and discourses (as LaPointe, 2010, p. 2, puts it) “position individuals and construct their identities in the interaction between narrator and audience. . . .

Positioning refers to the process through which people can adopt, resist, and offer the subject positions made available in discourses and master narratives.”

Identity development is coconstructing a new story about (parts of) the self from the existing story. From the perspective of dialogical self theory, the trajectory from an old to a new story ideally starts with the formulation of an I-position, the subsequent broadening of this I-position by means of a dialogue to other relevant I-positions, and runs, via consecutive dialogical shifts, from these I-positions to a meta-position and from the meta-position to the formulation of a promoter-position (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Winters, Meijers, Lengelle, & Baert, 2012). By inviting I-positions, we mean that an individual is asked to enter the dialogue in a multivoiced way—life experiences can even be discussed in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Then a meta-position becomes valuable; it allows one to look at one’s I-positions from a distance. This allows a usefully detached overview of a situation. In career learning this means that students develop and express various perspectives without becoming “married” to them from the outset. The integrative understanding gained through a meta-position is intended to lead to action or at least to the intention to act with respect for the complexity or changeability of the work environment. The “position” that is capable of such action is called a promoter-position. A promoter-position is introduced as a new position by a significant other or by oneself and allows the integration of other I-positions in such a way that the individual is enabled or stimulated to make a choice or take an action. Powerful promoter-positions are able to integrate positive and negative feelings. Promoter-positions, going beyond the spur of the moment, “have a certain extension over time and, as innovative and integrative energies, they facilitate and stimulate the development of the self” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 234).

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

In modern societies, schools offer—for a variety of reasons (e.g., the institutionalization of youth as a life phase and the unpredictability of careers)—the best opportunity for a career dialogue. It proves to be difficult, however, to realize a dialogical career approach in schools (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2011; Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011). Schools rarely offer room for students’ narratives to be developed or expressed (Winters, Meijers, Kuijpers, & Baert, 2009). Educational culture is monological and focused on control by means of tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007); as a result, most teachers are uncertain about their abilities to help students in developing a career narrative. It is important to acknowledge that teachers feel uncertain in this area, because the effectiveness of a dialogical career approach largely depends—as in all forms of counseling (Cooper, 2008; Wampold, 2001)—on the trust the counselor has in the chosen approach.

Existing narrative career counseling approaches do not decrease the uncertainty teachers have because these approaches are vague about the learning processes that are at the foundation of the development of a career story. They tend to see identity as self-contained (Cochran, 1997); they focus on reflective abilities as the key factor for identity development while neglecting modern brain research that stresses the importance of intuitions and emotions (LaPointe, 2010); or they assume that experiential learning automatically results in better intuition and insight into the self and thus in better career decision making (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009). Therefore, they cannot explain or concretize the crucial role of a positioning dialogue in the development of a career identity.

In this article we explore to what degree (career) guidance conversations in vocational education enable the development of a career identity among students. We are interested to see whether student (career) guidance conversations have a “narrative quality” (i.e., give the student room to position him- or herself by inviting I- and meta-positions and by introducing promoter positions), and whether this in turn can inspire a concretization of narrative career counseling approaches, including practical recommendations for teachers in their (new!) role as career counselors. We conducted an explorative study of 30 guidance conversations to answer the central research question:

What happens when in a conversation between a teacher/mentor and a student an I-position is formulated by the student, the teacher, or the mentor from the workplace regarding the student, and how does this relate to the narrative quality of the conversation?

More specifically, we will examine the following questions:

- How often during a conversation does positioning of the student occur?
- Who does the positioning?
- Who responds to the positioning?
- What is the quality of this response to student positioning?

METHOD

We analyzed 30 student guidance conversations: 10 conversations between teachers and 15-year-old students in prevocational education (prevocational group); 10 conversations between teachers, workplace mentors, and 18- and 19-year-old students in secondary vocational education (secondary vocational group); and 10 conversations between workplace mentors and 18- and 19-year-old students in secondary vocational education (workplace group). Besides the student’s age and his or her partner(s) in the conversation, the three contexts differ significantly from a cultural perspective (Geurts & Meijers, 2009), and therefore offer different opportunities for positioning. Prevocational education predominantly attracts students from social groups with little economic, educational, and cultural capital, explaining the culture of carefulness (i.e., much attention on the well-being of each individual student). This culture is probably positive for inviting and broadening of I-positions. Contrary to this “warm” culture, secondary vocational education is traditionally characterized by a businesslike culture with little personal attention for students. It is a culture that probably is not positive for the narrative quality of (career) conversations. Like secondary vocational education, the workplace has a businesslike culture, but it values personal achievements as a requisite for collective achievements. This culture probably favors the development of promoter positions.

The majority of the students and of the teachers/mentors were female; 18 were from the department of health care, 8 from technical studies, and 4 from economics. The conversations took place in the location where students did their placement, with the exception of prevocational education students, who had the conversations in school. We filmed the conversations in prevocational and secondary vocational education as part of a broader project in which the teachers later received training to help them organize their guidance conversations in a more career-oriented manner. To get a more nuanced and complete picture, we additionally filmed 10 randomly selected conversations between students from secondary vocational education and their

mentors from placement. All 30 conversations focused on the student's placement experience. One of the researchers contacted the teachers and mentors (via e-mail or telephone) in advance to explain the study; the teachers and mentors in turn asked for the students' permission to record their conversations. Before the start of each conversation, the study was explained again and then formalized by requesting informed consent. All of the participants gave their permission to record and analyze the conversations.

We built on the work of Winters and colleagues (2009), who showed that in guidance conversations in secondary vocational education with both teachers and mentors from placement and students, the teachers talk the most and they are the ones that determine what the conversation is about. On a content level the driving force behind this seems to be the academic agenda (i.e., mostly about education, fewer about the profession and the student's career, and least about the student's personal life). On a form level, this translates into a relative dominance of the help-oriented component (information and appreciation) over the career-oriented component (stimulating reflection and action). On the relational level, teachers and mentors from placement talk mostly about and against students, but hardly ever with them. The extent to which guidance conversations enable students to develop a career story, however, remained unclear. Based on the assumption that career stories can be developed when—in guidance conversations—the development of I-, meta-, and promoter-positions is fostered, we focus in the analysis on positioning (i.e., is an I-, meta-, or promoter-position formulated and by whom?) and the reactions to this positioning (who reacts and description of the reaction). We adjusted the codebook from the study of Winters and colleagues (2009) to include I-position (any positioning of the student; e.g., I like to help clients), meta-position (the formulation of underlying abstraction in relation to one or more I-positions; e.g., helping people has always been important to me), and promoter position (the formulation of an action in relation to one or more I-positions; e.g., I want to find out if employees feel the same way I do about helping people), and a blank space to describe the reaction to this positioning. In order to establish reliability, three researchers analyzed a minimum of two randomly selected conversations and the results were discussed until consensus was achieved.

RESULTS

The average conversations in the three contexts have different lengths. For the prevocational group, the average length of a conversation was 7 minutes (ranging between 5 and 11 minutes); for the workplace group, the average length of a conversation was 23 minutes (ranging from 12 to 48 minutes); and for the secondary vocational group—with conversations between teacher, mentor, and student—the average length of a conversation was 40 minutes (ranging between 27 and 67 minutes). We will answer the questions formulated above by presenting the mean results for the conversations as a whole, and for each of the three contexts separately (because I-, meta-, and promoter-positions may be valued differently due to the cultural differences between the contexts).

Question 1: How Often Does Positioning Occur?

The results with respect to the question, "How often during a conversation does positioning of the student occur by the students themselves, by a teacher, or by a mentor from workplace?" are

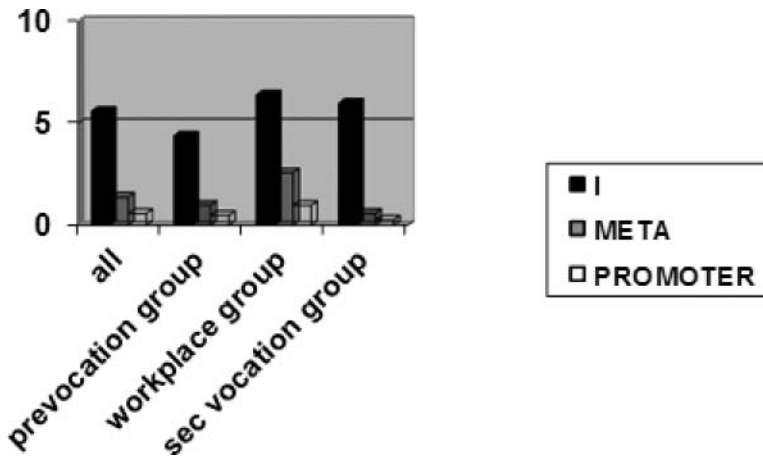


FIGURE 1 Number of student positions formulated in an average conversation, split for the three contexts.

illustrated in Figure 1. Positioning occurs in each of the three contexts. In an average prevocational group conversation, an I-position is formulated 4.5 times (about 1 every 2 minutes); 6.5 times in a workplace group conversation (1 every 4 minutes); and 6 times in secondary vocational group conversations (1 every 7 minutes).

Earlier we defined a promoter-position as a newly introduced position that allows the integration of other I-positions in such a way that the individual is enabled or stimulated to make a choice or take an action. According to this definition, not a single promoter-position was formulated in the 30 conversations. Even when we redefined a promoter-position as the formulation of a concrete action in relation to an I-position, only a few promoter-positions were formulated. With regard to meta-positions, the average was 1 for pre-education, 2.5 for the workplace, and 0.5 for secondary vocational education group per conversation. With regard to promoter-positions, the average is 0.5 for prevocational education, 1 for the workplace, and less than 0.5 for secondary vocational education group per average conversation. This is in line with dialogical self theory, which defines meta- and promoter-positions as higher order integrations of different I-positions. Dialogical self theory does not suggest how these numbers ideally relate, but it is clear that a broader base of I-positions is necessary to formulate a meta- or promoter-position. From an educational point of view, an average of 1 meta-position and 0.5 promoter-position per average conversation is low, because the majority of these students have (as we know from other research; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2009) not even a beginning of a career identity.

We conclude that positioning indeed occurs in student guidance conversations, although we mostly find I-positions and very few meta- and promoter-positions.

Questions 2 and 3: Who Does the Positioning and Who Responds to the Positioning?

The results for the question, "Who does the positioning?" systematically point to the student. For the three contexts and each of the different positions, the percentage of positions formulated

by the student is over (or equal to) 80%, with the exception of meta-positions in secondary vocational education (happened twice, out of six in total, by the teacher). For the question, “Who responds to the positioning?” the reactions come almost exclusively from the teacher or mentor. The only exceptions here are three student reactions in conversations in the workplace and six student reactions in conversations in secondary vocational education. We conclude that it is mostly the student who does the positioning and almost exclusively the teacher or mentor from placement who responds to the positioning.

Question 4: What Is the Quality of the Response to Student Positioning?

For the question, “What is the response to student positioning?” we analyzed the quality of the responses and—based on a grounded theory approach—found four different strategies: ignoring the I-position (ignoring), repositioning by talking on behalf of the student (repositioning), broadening the I-position without conclusion (broadening), and dialogue in the direction of the formulation of a promoter-position (promoting). First we describe each strategy in a few words and illustrate each strategy using actual transcripts from the conversations (S = student, T = teacher, and M = mentor from placement). After that, we discuss the number of strategies used to respond to student positioning in an average conversation.

1. *Ignoring the Positioning*

Characteristic for this strategy is that when an I-position is expressed (and this is mostly done by the student, see above), it is ignored (almost exclusively by the teacher or mentor, as we know from Question 3). In the example of this strategy shown below, the student formulates an I-position in S2 that is completely ignored by the teacher in T3.

- T1: You're excited about your placement?
 S1: Yes, it will be fun. Though I first had something else in mind (names it).
 T2: And you couldn't do that or didn't want to?
 S2: I don't like working with old people.
 T3: But you are excited about this placement . . .

2. *Repositioning by Talking on Behalf of the Student*

Characteristic for the strategy of repositioning is that a teacher or mentor does respond to student positioning, but does not appreciate the I-position in its own right; no effort is made to broaden the formulated I-position, or to connect this position to other I-positions in order to develop a meta-position, or to integrate the I-position into a promoter-position. Instead, the teacher or mentor only reformulates the I-position brought in by the student. This is often done, as the fragment below illustrates, to make the conversation less complex. The student formulates a problematic I-position in S3, and the teacher reformulates in T3 proposing a slightly different I-position, thereby “solving” the problem by making this position dominant.

- S1: We did that at the start, dissection of the rat.
 T1: That's a first for you, isn't it?
 S2: To do that myself, yes . . .

M2: From the moment it was dead, of course.

T2: Of course, of course. But you have never done things like that in school.

S3: No. It was kind of hard at first, that he had to die. He had to, of course . . .

T3: Okay, but once it's dead, things get really interesting. And you get used to it, especially you.

More than in the strategy of ignoring, repositioning does imply a reaction to student positioning, although this reaction is nondialogical and often done to relieve complexity.

3. *Broadening I-Positions, But Without a Conclusion*

Characteristic for this strategy is that a teacher or mentor tries to broaden the student I-position and tries to connect this position to other I-positions in order to develop a meta-position. This positioning does not, however, lead to integration of I-positions. In this fragment the teacher helps the student to come from a vague feeling expressed in S2 to the formulation of an I-position in S3. The teacher then broadens the student's positioning to include her placement experience, overcoming potential conflict by considering it from a meta-level in T5.

S1: (talking about experience in placement, setting boundaries with young children) At first I didn't, but now I do.

T1: Why is that, that you didn't do it before and now you do?

S2: I don't know. I think I felt . . . I don't know how to say this. I found it hard, at first . . . to do something I didn't really want to do.

T2: But why, why didn't you want to?

S3: I guess because I wanted the children to like me.

T3: You're scared you can no longer be the nice teacher?

S4: I guess so, yes (smiling). See I know I can't be the nice teacher all the time, but still. . . . It's hard for me.

T4: So how is that now that you do say something about it? Are you still the nice teacher?

S5: You know, I didn't notice that the children like me less. So I can do this. And I know it's more clear to children.

T5: So you can and children need it, knowing when they do good but also when they do bad. [At the mentor] Do you see student's development in this?

The teacher here changes the subject after her formulation of the abstraction ("so you can" in T5), but does not come to a shared conclusion. Although more dialogical, the strategy of broadening does not lead to an integration of I-positions.

4. *Dialogue in the Direction of a Promoter Position*

Characteristic for this strategy is that, supplementary to the third strategy, positioning does lead to integration in the formulation of a promoter-position. In this illustration, the teacher helps the student to formulate an I-position in S2 and to explore (broaden) it in S3 and S4. The teacher then summarizes from a meta-level in T6 and challenges the student to formulate *where to go from here*.

T1: (Referring to a previous conversation) We talked about keeping a diary, did you do that?

S1: No.

T2: So what is it that's holding you back?

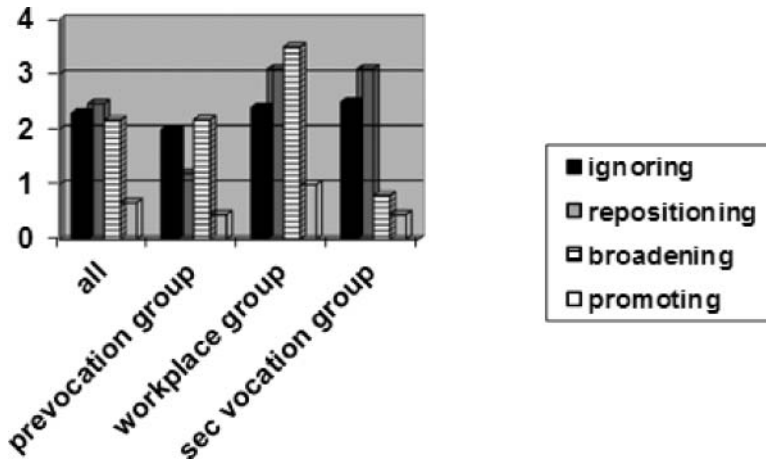


FIGURE 2 Number of strategies used to respond to positioning in an average conversation, split for the three contexts.

- S2: I think, I think, in itself . . . I actually would like to know how people see me, but to have to ask for it . . . (at this point, the teacher makes several suggestions; e.g., to plan it in a weekly team meeting)
- S3: It's just me, 'cause I know I can ask anyone about this, but. . . Oh I don't know, sitting here talking about it I think, "That's just stupid."
- T3: And a pity. It's holding you back. And by talking about it, people know this and might even be able to help you.
- M3: And what's more, we as mentors would see that you are working on this and how you are doing it. That enables us to support you in that, but also when we see that you are well prepared and do well, we trust you to be more independent next time. We can learn to trust you in this job.
- T4: What does this information do to you?
- S4: She's right. I shouldn't be such a chicken, but just ask.
- T5: What do you think about being able to work more independently, do you like that?
- S5: I do! (Student talks about experience in placement, washing people.)
- T6: So in doing this, you can grow to work more independently and that makes you feel good. I wonder what it is that can help you with this, 'cause you say you know this and yet you hold back. Is there anything you want me to do, or your mentor?
- S6: I don't know, I have to work on this.

Comparing this fragment to the fragment in Dialogue 3, we notice that the teacher takes more time to “fine-tune” with the student and come to actual shared meaning. From this basis, she invites the student to express in concrete terms what her next steps will be. The strategy of promoting thereby integrates a new position and concludes with an (intention for) action through dialogue.

Figure 2 shows that the three studied contexts show strong similarities when it comes to using strategies ignoring and promoting. In an average conversation a formulated position is ignored twice (to 2.5 times for the workplace and secondary vocational group), while per conversation an I-position less than once (0.5 times for the prevocational and secondary vocational group) stimulates a dialogue resulting in the formulation of a promoter-position. The strategy re-positioning happens

twice per average conversation (once per conversation in the prevocational group and three times per conversation in the workplace and secondary vocational group). When it comes to promoting as a strategy, an average conversation shows this dynamic twice (the workplace group stands out with an average of 3.5 times per conversation, as compared to the prevocational and secondary vocational groups).

Looking back to our original research question, “What happens when in a conversation between a teacher/mentor and a student an I-position is formulated regarding the student, and how does this relate to the narrative quality of the conversation?” we can now conclude that positioning does occur. It is done by the students themselves, to which the teacher/mentor responds most with nondialogical strategies (ignoring and repositioning). The narrative quality is found in the strategies of broadening and promoting. In an average placement conversation this hardly happens (see also Winters et al., 2009).

DISCUSSION

More and more it becomes important for youngsters to develop a career identity—a story that helps to define who they are and how they should act in a changing career context. Research has shown the crucial role of the dialogue about the personal and societal meaning of work as a key to the development of a career identity (Kuijpers & Meijers, 2011; Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011), yet existing narrative career theories cannot explain this role. Building on dialogical self theory, we understand the development of a career identity in terms of positioning; as a dynamic process from I-positions to a meta-position and subsequently to a promoter-position. We assume that the process of positioning is crucial for the narrative quality of student guidance conversations. In the present study, we have explored this quality in three culturally different contexts within vocational education.

Results show that the average conversation has potential regarding the construction of a career identity. Positioning does happen, mainly by students themselves. In prevocational education more I-positions are formulated than in secondary vocational education and more than in the workplace, probably due to the existing culture of carefulness (i.e., much attention for the well-being of each individual student). In the workplace, more meta- and promoter-positions are formulated than in both other contexts, probably due to a businesslike culture in which every individual is held responsible for the success of the group. In secondary vocational education, the conversations are longest but they offer less room for positioning than the less standardized and short inquiries in prevocational education about how the student’s placement went. This is probably due to the fact that 65% of all students in secondary vocational education enter the labor market immediately after completing their study. Therefore, the quality of secondary vocational education is under close surveillance of the Department of Education, employers, and politicians, forcing schools to use standardized evaluative procedures that leave little room for the narratives of both students and teachers (for the same tendency in the United States, see Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In none of the contexts studied does a dialogue dominate: When a student positions him- or herself, teacher and mentor strategies mostly are not directed to stimulate the broadening of I-positions, let alone to the formulation of meta- and promoter-positions.

Despite these results, our research may be helpful for both understanding and improving career learning and career guidance in schools. First, our theoretical model concretizes the development of a career identity as a process of positioning. Second, the results show the different strategies teachers and mentors use in reaction to the positioning of the student. We suggest incorporating

our application of dialogical self theory into teacher training to raise awareness about more dialogical reaction strategies to achieve a broadening of students' positions, and to stimulate them to develop the capacity to reflect on themselves (meta-positions) and to find ways for their future development (promoter-positions).

A follow-up study should include the teacher/mentor's personal positioning, rather than choosing for mere positioning of the student, as we did in our design. Looking at the research data of Kuijpers and colleagues (2011), Winters and colleagues (2009), and this study, it becomes clear that helping students to develop a career story is not a matter of giving the right tips or explanations, but of working with students to identify the right words and concepts, including their emotional significance. Doing so is what enables students to express the emotional impact of their experiences (we found that teachers/mentors did no further exploration of students' feelings or emotions). In order to foster the (career) learning process, teachers should be encouraged to share their own life experiences; research on successful relationships between mentors and mentees shows that a mentor's willingness to speak about his or her own life experiences is essential for the establishment of trust (Colley, 2003; Meijers, 2008).

Although schools, and thus teachers, increasingly are becoming aware of their responsibility in guiding students in the development of a career identity, the results in this study confirm that they find deepening of the conversation and the further development of the student's career story difficult. Making the process of career learning more insightful only partially solves that problem; because schools do not have the space yet—institutionally or culturally—to organize career conversations, teachers need to learn collectively. Their starting point would be to look at actual practical problems and to engage in a group dialogue about those problems (Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Rowe, 2008). Such a dialogue does not by definition or in the first place seek consensus, but assumes pluralism and even conflict (Chiva, Alegre, & Lapiedra, 2007). In other words, a dialogue is needed wherein teachers also have the opportunity to formulate I-positions, broaden the bandwidth of those positions, and ultimately transform them into meta- and promoter-positions.

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