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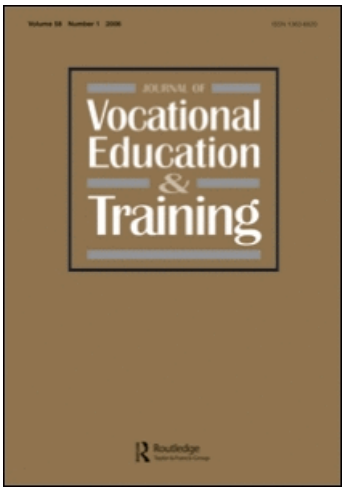

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What are vocational training conversations about? Analysis of vocational training conversations in Dutch vocational education from a career learning perspective

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What are vocational training conversations about? Analysis of vocational training conversations in Dutch vocational education from a career learning perspective

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Research evidence shows that a career dialogue is a central part of any powerful learning environment for career learning. In vocational education and training, there are three important parties in this dialogue: the student, the teacher and the mentor from practice. In this paper the communication between these parties is investigated in secondary vocational training in the Netherlands. Results suggest that the potential of the dialogue (or trialogue, as it concerns three parties) is hardly utilised: the communication between student, teacher and mentor from practice is not dialogical and only discusses the most successful way to a degree, but not to a career.

Keywords: competence-based education; mentoring/coaching; research methods; communication

Background and rationale

By 2010, institutes for vocational education and training all over the Netherlands have to meet the criteria of competence-based education (www.minocw.nl). There are as many definitions as there are scholars (for an overview of definitions see: Dochy and Nickmans 2005; van Merriënboer, van der Klink and Hendriks 2002 – for an overview of aims and critiques see: Mittendorff et al. 2008), but competence-based education essentially implies 'creating opportunities for students and workers, close to their world of experience in a meaningful learning environment (preferably professional practice) where the learner can develop integrated, performance-oriented capabilities for handling the core problems in practice' (Biemans et al. 2004, 530). The first half of this description cites the (most important) conditions of competence-based education, the second half addresses the core of it. We discuss parts of it here – starting with the core, then the conditions – to provide an outline for this paper.

The learner can develop

Initially, competence-based education was primarily associated with behaviourism, mastery learning and modular teaching (Mulder 2004). Professional activities were taken out of their original context and broken down into singular tasks which could be

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taught. This approach gained a lot of criticism and hardly proved to be effective (Mulder 2007). Modern development of competences is seen from the more holistic perspective of social constructivism (Biemans et al. 2004; Wesselink et al. 2007). Knowledge and skills are no longer considered products that can be transferred from one person to another, but the results of learning activities by learners (Giddens 1991; Simons 1993). This has implications for both educational institutes and learners, as will be discussed further.

Capabilities for handling the core problems in practice

Education should be a preparation for the challenges that learners encounter in practice. Modern employees feel pressured to be flexible and show high 'employability' in our rapidly-changing knowledge society (Meijers 1995; Thijssen 1998). They are faced with unpredictable career paths that go beyond the scope of a job or organisation (Arthur 1994; Defilippi and Arthur 1994). For vocational *education* institutes, this implies a major change in approach (Baert, Dekeyser and Sterck 2002; Dochy and Nickmans 2005): the starting point of the curriculum shifts from academic requirements to competences needed to work in practice. Education must rise above its role as a (mere) training centre where knowledge and skills are transferred, and become a 'career centre' aimed at guiding students in their – study and professional – career development (Meijers, Kuijpers and Bakker 2006; Geurts 2007).

The characteristics of our modern society pose a challenge for *learners* as well: they will have to take responsibility for directing their own careers (Savickas 2001; Meijers and Wardekker 2002; Kuijpers and Scheerens 2006). Simons (1993, 299–300) concluded from his own research that 'there is needed much more than just giving opportunities for independent work: there is (metacognitive) knowledge to be acquired, there are conceptions to be changed and there are activities and regulation processes to be learned'. Being able to make an informed career decision requires learners to develop a professional identity, defined as 'a structure or network of meaning where the individual connects his/her motivation, interests and capacities on a conscious level to acceptable professional roles' (Meijers 1995, 63). This is where the individual draws a connection on a conscious level between a personal life theme (van Maanen 1977) and an acceptable social role (Wijers and Meijers 1996; Law, Meijers and Wijers 2002).

Enabling students to be self-directing and to develop a professional identity requires that they learn specific competences (Blustein 1992; Dawis 1996; Savickas 2001), we call them career competences here, that steer the development of a person's career in a particular direction. Kuijpers (2003) has developed an instrument to measure career competences in employees, which was recently used – with small adaptations – in a survey concerning students in Dutch pre-vocational education. The following competences were demonstrated (Kuijpers, Meijers and Bakker 2006):

- Career reflection: reflective behaviour based on experiences and choices to reveal qualities and motives that are important for the future;
- career shaping: proactive behaviour that influences the course of one's career by researching jobs, making deliberate decisions and taking action to make sure jobs and study match with one's personal qualities and motives;
- networking: interactive behaviour to build and maintain contacts on the internal and external job market, aimed at career development.

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In a meaningful learning environment

These career competences can only be trained in a so-called 'powerful' learning environment. A learning environment is powerful (see also Meijers and Kuijpers 2007) when it tackles problems with the transfer of knowledge and the lack of student motivation and when it stimulates meaningful (as opposed to superficial, see Vermunt 1992), transformative learning (Illeris 2004).

The transfer problem, or limited use of what is learned in concrete actions (Caravaglia 1993), can be handled by providing a learning environment similar – as much as possible – to the context where the theory will have to be put to practice (Lodewijks 1995). In problem-based education real-life problems are the starting point for learning and learning assignments (Bailey, Hughes and Moore 2004; Collins, Brown and Newman 1989). Mott et al. (1999) and Cohen-Scali (2003) illustrate how real-life experience in a professional setting has a beneficial influence on the development of career competences.

Motivational psychology shows that the motivation problem – students with little motivation for reflective activities in the curriculum (Law, Meijers and Wijers 2002; Zijlstra and Meijers 2006) – can be met by allowing students to have an active role (participation) and control over their own learning process (Boekaerts and Simons 1993; Duffy and Cunningham 1996; Simons, van der Linden and Duffy 2000; Bruijn 2006). Weick and Berlinger (1989) and Voncken and Breemer (2008) illustrate the beneficial influence of such inquiry-based learning environment on students' self-directedness in the career.

The development of career competences is a reflective learning process, where the meaning of professional experiences is explicated for the person and society as a whole. This reflective learning process demands a dialogue (Wijers and Meijers 1996; Savickas 2001; Meijers and Wardekker 2002; Poortman 2007) where thoughts and feelings of the student about relevant experiences and choices are at the centre of the conversation (Bardick et al. 2006). A career dialogue is a conversation between the student and his/her mentor about the meaning of things the student experiences in real-life assignments in the school and in practice, and about the impact of them on the student's life and his/her professional career (Meijers and Kuijpers 2007). The aim of the conversation is to make connections between relevant experiences for the student from the professional world on the one hand, and the developing self and professional identity on the other. Meijers, Kuijpers and Bakker (2006) illustrate that a career dialogue in school and practice, contributes to the formation of the above mentioned career competences and their use in actual choice-making and learning experiences.

A combination of inquiry-based and problem-based methods is an important incentive for the development of career competences, yet only very few schools nowadays live up to the conditions for a powerful learning environment (Meijers, Kuijpers and Bakker 2006; Kuijpers, Meijers and Bakker 2006). If there is career guidance, it is often organised in the traditional way: non dialogical and aimed especially on information provision (e.g. career advice).

Conditions

In this paper we focus on students in Dutch secondary vocational education.[1] We are particularly interested in the communication they have with teachers and mentors about relevant, practice-based placements and experiences they have had in the profes-

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sional world. In Dutch, a placement in vocational education is called 'bpv', and the conversations of a student with his/her teacher and mentor from practice are 'bpv-conversations'. Since there doesn't seem to be an appropriate term in English (vocational training conversation? conversation in placements?), we will use the term 'bpv-conversation' in this paper. Although there are differences both between and within schools, the common understanding is that during a placement there are at least two meetings between the teacher, the mentor from practice, and the student: one at the beginning and one at the end. As we put forward in this paper, the 'bpv-conversation' (not the same as career conversation) could be the ideal place for career learning to take place. Whether this is the case, is the research question in an ongoing study that we will discuss further.

Project 'Career learning in competence-based education'

What happens in the conversations between students, teachers and mentors from practice within Dutch secondary vocational education is an important question in the ongoing research and development project 'Career learning in competence-based education'. This project was initiated by The Hague University and gets support from Het Platform Beroepsonderwijs (www.hetplatformberoepsonderwijs.nl), an organisation that subsidies innovation projects in vocational education.

The broad aim of the project is to map (research component) and stimulate (development component) the communication between the student and his/her teacher and mentor from practice. Since the dialogue concerns three parties, we prefer to call this the 'trialogue' (illustrated in Figure 1).

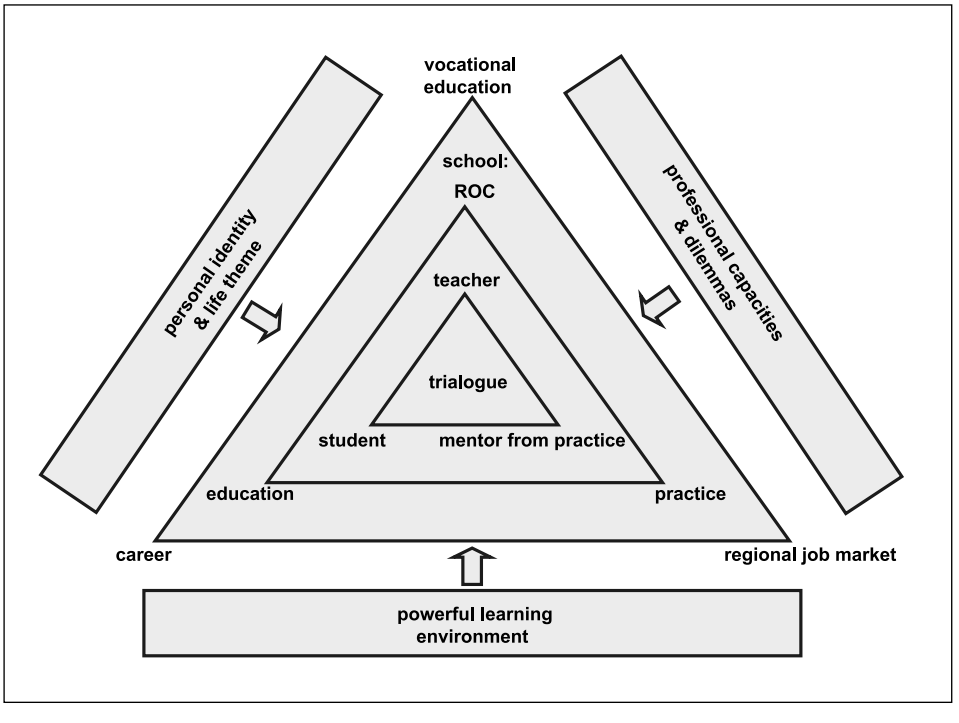

Figure 1. Illustration of the trialogue.

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For the execution of the project, The Hague University collaborates with a national bureau for advice and expertise on innovations in education (www.kpcgroep.nl) and with a school for secondary vocational education, the Regional Training Centre De Leijgraaf (in Dutch: Regionaal Opleidingscentrum, ROC) (www.leijgraaf.nl). Also, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (www.ppw.kuleuven.be/cscap) is involved, since research is done as part of a PhD project.

In 2007–2008 the project group finished a baseline measurement for career guidance at the school. This measurement combines three complementary methods to map career orientation and guidance: a questionnaire, a series of semi-structured group interviews and the analysis of actual conversations between students, teachers and mentors practice. For this paper, we focus on the latter.

Research aim and questions

This study provides a first description of what happens in 'bpv-conversations' in ROC De Leijgraaf between the three parties in the trialogue (student, teacher and mentor from practice). Conversations are analysed from a career-learning perspective for formal characteristics, content, form, and relational components. Two research questions are investigated:

(1) How is the trialogue organised in placement / 'bpv-conversations'?
(2) Do 'bpv-conversations' between student, teacher and mentor from practice stimulate career learning in students?

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the lack of prior research in this particular context, we chose case studies as a starting point. A case study is defined as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used' (Yin 1989, 23). The case studies in this research project serve as a first exploration of 'bpv-conversations'. Ideally, they will inspire further research and theory formation (Luyten and Corveleyn 2003).

Method

Sample

We analysed 24 'bpv-conversations' (cases). In these 24 conversations, there were 24 first- and second-year students from the different departments (nine from economics, five from health care, four from ICT and six from technique) of 13 class-groups (five in level two, one in level three and seven in level four) in ROC De Leijgraaf; and also 15 teachers (eleven in one conversation, one in two, two in three and one in five) and 18 mentors from practice (sixteen in one conversation, one in two, one in four and two conversations in absence of a mentor from practice). The distribution in gender for the students was seventeen boys (71%) and seven girls (29%), for the teachers six men (40%) and nine women (60%) and for the mentors from practice ten men (56%) and eight women (44%). Table 1 provides an overview of student characteristics.

The conversations took place in the location where students did their placement. The situation was different for students from the department of technique, whose

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Table 1. Overview of student characteristics.

	Economics	Health care	ICT	Technique	Total
Year 1 – 2	9 – 0	1 – 4	0 – 4	0 – 6	10 – 14
Level 2 – 3 – 4	3 – 0 – 6	0 – 4 – 1	1 – 0 – 3	6 – 0 – 0	10 – 4 – 10
Boys – girls	6 – 3	1 – 4	4 – 0	6 – 0	17 – 7
Total	9	5	4	6	24

conversations were organised in a training centre (associated with the school) without a mentor from practice (for four conversations there was a mentor from the training centre present, the other two were conversations between teacher and student). Because of specific organisational arrangements for placement in each class-group, conversations followed were situated at various times in the placement (one at the beginning, six at the end and seventeen in between).

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Procedure

We first asked for direct collaboration from the teachers, but their response was limited. We then turned to the school's management and asked permission to record 10 random 'bpv-conversations' for each of De Leijgraaf's three departments[2] (economics, health care, ICT and technique). Instead of the planned 30 conversations, we had to be satisfied with only 24: resistance (in students, teachers and/or mentors from practice) and practical restraints (timing of the conversations, regulations in practice that don't allow recording, etc.) often proved insurmountable. One of the researchers met with the participant teachers in advance to explain the study, the teachers in turn asked for the student's and mentor's permission to record their 'bpv-conversation'. Before the start of each conversation, the explanation of the study was repeated and formalised by requesting informed consent. For 20 conversations, the participants agreed that the material could be used for feedback. Three students wanted their recordings destroyed after analysis and one refused the recording by camera (audio instead).

Analyses

For the analysis of the data (12 hours, 10 minutes and 52 seconds of recordings, filtered for any disturbance that was not related to the actual 'bpv-conversation') we developed a framework based on theory and our research questions. To answer the first research question, we wanted to evaluate formal characteristics (e.g. who is talking, who poses the questions) and form (e.g. is the aim to give information to the student, to stimulate action or reflection, to motivate?) and relational (e.g. role of the student in the trialogue) components of the conversation. To answer the second research question, we made an inventory of contents addressed in 'bpv-conversations', paying special attention to career competences.

The resulting framework consists of four broad themes (formal characteristics, content, form, relational components), whereby each was divided in a number of mutually exclusive categories (see Appendixes 1 and 2 for the framework and codebook). In order to establish reliability, the analysts were trained to use this framework: three randomly selected conversations were analysed together and the results were

discussed (and the framework altered) until consensus was achieved. Each conversation was then divided into meaningful sequences, until a change appeared in one (or more) of the broad themes. Each sequence was scored and codings were quantified within and about conversations.

Results

In this section the results of the analyses of 'bpv-conversations' will be described, following the classification of the framework presented above (see also Appendixes 1 and 2). At the end, we will illustrate the quantitative measures of description (percentages and means) with a sample anecdote.

Formal characteristics

A first, strictly formal finding concerns the duration of conversations. A common 'bpv-conversation' takes about half an hour. Table 2 provides an overview per department and illustrates the proportion of time (mean time and mean percentage[3] for each conversation) each of the parties was talking.

This overview illustrates that the time a student is actually talking in these conversations is relatively limited (mean = 21%), while the proportion a teacher is talking is very high (mean = 53%, so overall teachers talk for more than half of the conversation). Looking more at the content – not who's talking, but who's asking the questions and deciding the theme – the difference in proportions becomes more extreme: some 57% of what is said answers to the agenda of teachers/school, while the input of mentors from practice and students remains limited to 11% and 5% respectively (for 27% of conversation time, there's no clear input from any one of the three parties). The subjects mentioned in 'bpv-conversations' are discussed in the next paragraph.

Content

In this exploratory study, we aimed to asses what content is discussed in 'bpv-conversations'. We are especially interested in themes concerning the student's career (development). Table 3 illustrates the results.

In a 'bpv-conversation' the largest amount of time (40% see Section (a) of Table 3) goes to matters that don't fit our presupposed categories of content ('other'). This turns out to be mainly administration, e.g. discussing an instrument for vocational training and filling out forms where – what they call – competences[5] are assessed. This doesn't inspire a substantive conversation and is therefore mentioned separately.

When the conversation does discuss contents, it is mainly (32% of the time, see Section (a) of Table 3) about the student's study trajectory. More specifically most of the time goes to the assessment of learning goals (53% of study-time, see Section (b) of Table 3). This is mainly summative (41%) and only little formative (12%) evaluation. The time spent on asking students about their training in practice (33%, of which 25% in general and 8% about problems) or in school (14%, of which 9% in general and 5% about problems) is more limited by comparison.

The student's personal life and hobbies are hardly ever the subject of 'bpv-conversations' (0%, see Section (a) of Table 3). During informal moments before and after

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Table 2. Overview of conversation duration and who is talking (per department).

	Student	Teacher	Mentor from placement	Total
Economics				
Sum over 9 conversations	1h 27m 42s	2h 24m 57s	1h 48m 42s	5h 46m 19s
Mean per conversation (time)	9m 45s	16m 06s	12m 05s	38m 29s
Mean per conversation (%)	29 %	40 %	30 %	
Health care				
Sum over 5 conversations	35m 16s	1h 37m 16s	39m 10s	2h 52m 07s
Mean per conversation (time)	7m 03s	19m 27s	7m 50s	34m 25s
Mean per conversation (%)	23 %	53 %	24 %	
ICT + Techique				
Sum over 10 conversations	35m 25s	2h 05m 20s	43m 00s	3h 32m 26s
Mean per conversation (time)	3m 32s	12m 32s	4m 18s	21m 15s
Mean per conversation (%)	13 %	65 %	19 %	
ICT separately				
Sum over 4 conversations	24m 53s	54m 46s	35m 36s	2h 01m 57s
Mean per conversation (time)	6m 13s	13m 41s	8m 54s	30m 29s
Mean per conversation (%)	15 %	46 %	34 %	
Technique separately				
Sum over 6 conversations	10m 32s	1h 10m 34s	7m 24s	1h 30m 29s
Mean per conversation (time)	1m 45s	11m 46s	1m 14s	15m 05s
Mean per conversation (%)	11 %	77 %	9 %	
Total				
Sum over 24 conversations	**2h 38m 23s**	**6h 07m 33s**	**3h 10m 52s**	**12h 10m 52s**
Mean per conversation (time)	**6m 36s**	**15m 19s**	**7m 57s**	**30m 27s**
Mean per conversation (%)	**21 %**	**53 %**	**24 %**	
Weighed[4] mean over the departments (time)	**6m 47s**	**16m 02s**	**8m 04s**	**31m 23s**
Weighed mean over the departments (%)	**21 %**	**53 %**	**24 %**	

the actual conversation this might be mentioned (as witnessed by the researcher), but this information seems to be of no importance to teachers and mentors from practice during the formal 'bpv-conversation'.

The remaining time is divided among the categories of career and profession (14% each, see Section (a) of Table 3). In the trialogue hardly any (4%, see Section (d) of Table 3) evolution in education and training is discussed, more often (41%, see section d) generalities about the practice and mostly (55%, see Section (d) of Table 3) expectations on the professional attitude of (future) employees are mentioned.

Of the career competences we mentioned earlier, it's mainly reflection on qualities and making career decisions that are discussed (39% and 40% respectively, see Section (c) of Table 3), in other words the – superficial – evaluation of the skills the student does or doesn't have and what the next step to take might be. If the conversation about the career continues at all, either the motives of the student are discussed

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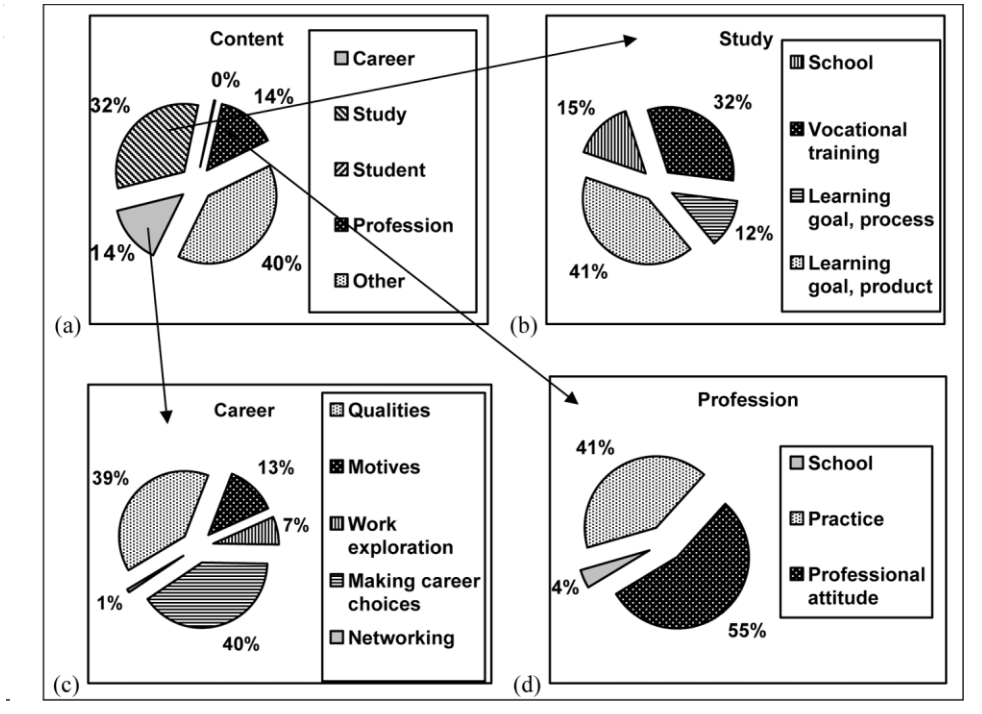
Table 3. Subjects in 'bpv-conversations', by theme.



(13%, see Section (c) of Table 3) or what work looks like in a particular sector of employment (work exploration, 7%, see Section (c) of Table 3). Only rarely is the conversation about contacts that are important in getting started in a certain profession (networking, 1%, see Section (c) of Table 3).

Form

Besides the content of 'bpv-conversations', the researchers have also studied their form. More specifically it's about the portions of time spent on giving information (informative), showing appreciation (affective) and stimulating reflection (reflective) and action (activating). Table 4 shows these proportions for the different departments.

The component that gets the most time in 'bpv-conversations', is the affective component. On average, 26% of the time goes to the positive and negative appreciation

Table 4. Proportion of time spent on various form components in 'bpv-conversations' (per department).

	Informative	**Affective**	**Reflective**	**Activating**
Economics	16 %	24 %	10 %	7 %
Health care	27 %	11 %	14 %	10 %
ICT	8 %	18 %	2 %	1 %
Technique	13 %	45 %	3 %	3 %
Total	**16%**	**26%**	**8%**	**6%**

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of students (and their competences); often this is related to learning goals. The informative component also gets an important part (16%) of conversation time. Both of these components combined form a more help-oriented approach to student guidance. The other components combine to form a more career-oriented approach. The analysis of these 24 'bpv-conversations' shows a relatively marginal position for the reflective and activating component (8% and 6% respectively). Students get their mentors' advice in these conversations in the form of an (expert) opinion, but the step to growth in the students is not made explicitly. The conversation goes further without an invitation to reflect upon this message or to take action. This implies that the potential of the 'bpv-conversation' as formative evaluation gets lost (see content, Table 3).

Relational components

The analysis of 'bpv-conversations' has shown that mentors (from school and placement) communicate mostly *against* (65%) and *about* (21%) students, and hardly *with* (9%) them. For the results per department, see Table 5. In a qualitative description of a typical 'bpv-conversation', the student is not portrayed as an equal partner in conversation. He/she seems trapped between two professional opinions and responds by either remaining passive or (merely) reacting to what is being said. Since the student has little opportunity to offer a personal opinion, that opinion cannot be picked up in the conversation.

Illustration: sample anecdote

This anecdote comes from a follow-up evaluation and reflection conversation with a first-year student of the department of economics (level four). It's an illustration of the way a student is typically addressed in 'bpv-conversations'. (T = teacher, M = mentor from practice, S = student).

T Well now, you've been working on this part [T points at document on the table]. If we look at the competences that you need: planning and organising, delivering quality and analysing. And I would like to add the professional attitude to that list [T looks at S, S nods]. So that is what we will talk about [T looks at M, M nods]. If we take the first, 'planning and organising', and I'm looking at you now [T looks at M, M nods]. How does he do at that, planning and organising his activities?

M Well, he does just great. He called our suppliers by himself. We let him do these things.

T Yes, yes [T looks at M, S stares at the table before him – nobody takes notes].

Table 5. Proportion of communication towards the student in 'bpv-conversations' (per department).

	About	**Against**	**With**	**Not clear**
Economics	21 %	67 %	4 %	8%
Health care	14 %	73 %	13 %	0%
ICT	41 %	38 %	15 %	6%
Technique	14 %	75 %	8 %	3%
Total	**21%**	**65%**	**9%**	**5%**

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M He knows very well what he is saying. He thinks about what he says, I can tell.
T Okay, yes [T looks at M, S stares at the table before him].
M But he's shy and because of that sometimes he is somewhat hesitant in his attitude to do things.
T Yes [For a moment S tries to make eye contact with M and nods, but T and M don't notice].
M That is something that has to do with the fact that he's only been here for a few weeks, all these unfamiliar people … You have to get used to that.
T Yes, yes [S tries to make eye contact again, and then stares at the table].
M At this moment, he's our only trainee. Usually there are more, and that makes it easier because they have things in common.
T Okay.
M But these things take time, that will come around … But with him, he is shy and quietly watches how things go.
T Yes, yes [S keeps looking at M]. Do you recognise that?
S Yes. Sure. That's my personality.
T Yes, yes.
M It's not a bad thing, you know, so don't take it that way [M puts his hand on S's shoulder].
S No, no.
T What you should keep in mind though, if you want to sit on that seat as a manager, is that you will have to step up.
S Yes [S nods, limited eye contact with T].
T You will have to. And that process of growth, you will have to go through during your education.
S Yes [S nods, limited eye contact with T].
T And right now, we are taking the first step.
S Yes [S nods, limited eye contact with T].
T And we want to signal this immediately, so that next time we can see a little improvement.
S Yes [S nods, limited eye contact with T].
T You understand?
S Yes.
T So the next competence…

In line with the results of our analyses, this student has a very marginal role in a conversation that is mostly about him. During the time his competences for planning and organising activities are being discussed/assessed (mostly formative evaluation), the student is not invited to express his point of view. Although this teacher does relate the student's characteristics to the requirements in professional attitude within his sector (high scores on the help-oriented components), the student is never stimulated to reflect on this information or to take action (the teacher mentions he 'will have to grow', but leaves the student clueless about how to do that).

Conclusion

We based our project on the assumption that career guidance and counselling have the potential to stimulate the development of a career perspective and a professional identity. These concepts are especially relevant in our rapidly-changing knowledge society.

In a large-scale research study based on questionnaires in Dutch (pre)vocational education, Kuijpers, Meijers and Bakker (2006) showed that career competences and a professional identity only develop in a learning environment that is characterised by a combination of problem-based and inquiry-based methods, and where a career

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dialogue can be held on the personal and social meaning of a student's experiences. The fact that the number of schools that actually provide this powerful learning environment is very small was the starting point for the research and development project 'Career learning in competence-based education'. The results, as discussed in this paper, show that the potential of the trialogue is not (yet) developed or being utilised.

Judging from the formal characteristics, students have a relatively limited part in the 'bpv-conversation' with their teacher and their mentor from practice. In the trialogue the teachers dominate: not only do they talk the most, but 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 (study > profession and career > student), often materialising as an instrument to guide and structure the conversations. This instrument embodies the expectations/demands from school and – with the upcoming introduction of competence-based education – this implies growing attention for students' competences. The result in practice is that the conversation becomes more formalised, with administration as the focal point instead of content (see also Den Boer and Nieuwenhuis 2002). The instrument does not stimulate a conversation with the student about competences, but serves as a checklist for a summative evaluation.

This doesn't mean career competences are not addressed, but when they are, it's mostly in the traditional educational context. This is why attention goes to a professional attitude (profession) and qualities and making career decisions (career). Education hereby follows the changing demands from the labour market, but does this from a traditional culture of knowledge transfer. 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). Guidance in vocational training implies giving information about professional subjects and assessing the students' competences from an expert opinion. The potential to invite students to reflect on their experiences and to stimulate them to take action is – as yet – not utilised.

This study quantifies that – on a relational level – mentors from school and practice talk mostly about and against students, but hardly ever with them. In the trialogue the students sit with their mentors, but this doesn't mean that they can take part in the conversation as equal partners. 'Bpv-conversations' in ROC De Leijgraaf today are aimed at evaluation and transference of expert opinions from the mentors to the students (see also Toolsema 2003; Mittendorff et al. 2008).

These results suggest that the potential of the dialogue (or trialogue, as it concerns three parties) is hardly utilised: 'bpv-conversations' discuss the most successful way to a degree and not necessarily to a career in practice. As for the first research question, the findings show that there is no real 'trialogue': students have a marginal role in the conversation, while teachers (school's agenda) dominate. The answer to the second research question is more subtle: while career learning is addressed in the conversations, the traditional culture in schools prevents the conversations from being stimulating.

Discussion

This study and previous research mentioned here, address the importance of the context in which educational innovations take place. Enthusiasm about the introduction of competence-based methods and career guidance as a holistic approach to education in institutes for vocational education and training must not make policymakers blind to

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the potential pitfalls. This first exploration of what actually happens in 'bpv-conversations' aims to be an eye-opener regarding the challenges to coaching and mentoring in modern education. The ambition of our broad project 'Career learning in competence-based education' is not only to define what works (knowledge creation), but to actually try out, evaluate and refine initiatives for 'good practice'.

The aim of this particular study was to evaluate career orientation in 'bpv-conversations' in vocational education and training. Our sample doesn't attempt to be representative and results can only be interpreted as tentative conclusions on where to invest when it comes to stimulating career guidance as a dialogue in vocational training. To account for possible selection in the sample (because of the timing of our study and the methodology of videotaping conversations), we included triangulation (Patton 1990) in our design.

Our most important recommendation for future research is to broaden the scope: include more groups and schools and transcend the micro-level of interactions (conversations between individuals) to explore organisations (management level) and society as a whole. Teachers and mentors from practice can only meet their new role expectations as mentors when they feel supported by their organisation. To be able to guide a reflexive process in their students, mentors first have to go through this process themselves (see Kelchtermans 2007). Education and practise are still looking for ways to meet these challenges, colouring the discussion as to whether the function of education should/can be narrowed to a (mere) preparation for the labour market (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad 2008). This question of who is responsible for student's education is also vivid in practise. As van Dam, Meijers and Hövels (2007) illustrate however, a powerful learning environment for career learning must be based on collaboration.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn here is that innovation in education must go hand in hand with innovation in educational culture. We agree with Wesselink (Wesselink et al. 2007) when she states that 'in the recent competence-based movement, a holistic approach is normatively put forward, but in practice the pitfalls of a disintegrative behaviourist model are still great'. The necessary change in culture is not a fact (Bruijn et al. 2005). In the following two years, our project 'Career learning in competence-based education' will try to stimulate this revolution step by step, starting in one school for vocational education in the Netherlands.

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Notes

1. This type of education is organised after pre-vocational education (for 12- to 16-year-old students) and is aimed at 16- to 20-year-old students. They can make a choice for a particular level of training, ranging from level one (assistant, in one year) to level four (specialist, in three/four years). In the Netherlands, some 60% to 65% of students are in secondary vocational education, as opposed to 35% to 40% in general secondary education.
2. Organisationally, ICT and technique form a single department. Because of major differences in their approach on placements (including conversations), we decided to handle and discuss them separately.
3. Mean of the percentages per person per conversation over the conversations of one department.
4. Since the number of conversations differs for the different departments, we 'weigh' the means as a correction. The result – which doesn't differ from the result before the correction – gives each department equal influence.
5. The notion competence is used here for learning goals posed by the school.

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Appendix 1. Framework for analysis of vocational training conversations

Formal characteristics				Content												Form				Relation
No	Time	Talking	Asking	OTHER	Study				Student	Profession						Help-O		Career-O		
		T = teacher, M = mentor in placement, S = student	T = teacher, M = mentor in placement, S = student +/– = whether or not this question is		School: G = general, P = problems	Vocational training: G = general, P = problems	Learning goal: C = process, D = product		Private: G = general, P = problems	Hobby and extracurricular activities	Education	Practice	Professional attitude	Qualities	Motives	Work exploration	Making career choices	Networking	Information for: T = teacher, M = mentor in practice, S = student , N = nobody	Appreciation: + = praise, - = critique, 0 = neutral	Stimulate reflection	Stimulate action	Communication about student	Communication against student	Communication with student

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Appendix 1. (*Continued*)

Who prepared the conversation?
Who structured the conversation?
Conversation stimulates trust?
Responsibility student?
Link with other conversations?
Aims clear?
Evaluation conversation?

No	Remarks / quotes

Appendix 2. Codebook

Formal characteristics

- *No*: number, each sequence gets a number (1, 2, 3, …) for future reference.
- *Time*: time the sequence ends, expressed hours'minutes'seconds (example 1'03'45 = 1hour 3minutes and 45seconds).
- *Talking*: write down who (teacher, mentor from practice, student) is talking – with a capital for the dominant talker and a small letter for short remarks (e.g. yes, no, hmm, …).
- *Asking*: write down who is asking the question, who determines what is talked about in the sequence (with +/– to show whether or not this theme is picked up).

Content

- *Other*: whatever doesn't fit the other content categories.

- *Study*
  - *School*: about students' training in school, with a distinction between general things and problems.
  - *Vocational training*: about students' training in placement, with a distinction between general things and problems.
  - *Learning goal*: about broad competences the student must learn in vocational training, with a distinction between process evaluation (formative) and product evaluation (summative).

- *Student*
  - *Private*: about the student's personal life (family, health, …), with a distinction between general things and problems.
  - *Hobby and extracurricular activities*: about the student's interests outside school.

- *Profession*
  - *Education*: about generalities, problems and/or developments in education.
  - *Practice*: about generalities, problems and/or developments in practice.
  - *Professional attitude*: about characteristics of the profession and expectations towards (future) employees.

- *Career*
  - *Qualities*: about strengths of the student, the things he/she is good at.
  - *Motives*: about values and dreams of the student for his/her career.
  - *Work exploration*: about characteristics of the profession in relation to the student's career ambition, personal values and dreams.
  - *Making career choices*: about career activities/choices/plans for the future.
  - *Networking*: about (gaining) contacts on the internal and external job market.

Form

- *Help oriented*
  - *Information*: write down who is informed in the sequence, for whom the information is relevant.
  - *Appreciation*: for sequences aimed at giving appreciation to the (competences of the) student.

- *Career oriented*
  - *Stimulate reflection*: for sequences aimed at stimulating the student to reflect on his/her personal experiences in vocational training.
  - *timulate action*: for sequences aimed at stimulating the student to take action, to do/try/experience something in vocational training.

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Relation: qualitative judgement on the position of the student in the trialogue

- *Communication about student*: the teacher and/or mentor from practice show no attention to the student's point of view.
- *Communication against student*: the teacher and/or mentor from practice take control (giving advice, formulating tasks, etc.) and fail to treat the student as an equal partner in conversation.
- *Communication with student*: the teacher and/or mentor from practice address the student as an equal partner in conversation, showing attention for his/her point of view.

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