Systemic and Strategic Development of School-based

Career Guidance from the Perspectives of Stakeholders

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Dr. Phil Thesis Summary

1. RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH: GOALS, SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

Ensuring that citizens have an easy access to guidance services and that these services are of high quality as well as coherently and holistically organized is expressed by the EU policy (CEDEFOP, 2008, 2009). The normative ideal of career guidance development should encompass a "whole-school approach" that sees guidance "at the heart of the school's raison d'être" (Sultana, 2004). However, achieving systemic unity and consistency in school-based career guidance field might be difficult in the era of school decentralization (Döbert, 2001) and rising school autonomy (Vereinigung der bayerische Wirtschaft, e.V., 2010; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2009), new "output management" and "communalization" of educational institutions (Döbert, 2001). German schools face increased space for autonomous planning and implementing their own career guidance programs. As observed by Niemeyer and Frey-Huppert (2009) every school has a great space for action for their work in the area of career guidance: "Dennoch hat jede Schule einen großen Gestaltungsspielraum hinsichtlich ihrer Arbeit zur Berufsorientierung" (p.35). Moreover, when schools have been opened for collaboration with businesses, chambers, municipality and community associations, NGOs etc. career guidance in schools have resulted in myriad of career education and counseling products and projects. For instance in the German Land of NRW, it is explicitly stated by the Ministry of Education, that school-based career guidance should be developed by the following responsible parties: 1) the pupils themselves, 2) pupils' family or official custodians, 3) schools, 4) career counselling services by Federal Employment Agencies (Agenturen für Arbeit – Germ.), 5) the economy (business organizations, companies), 6) local community (municipal initiatives), and 7) institutions of higher education (Rahmenkonzept des Ausbildungskonsens NRW "Berufsorientierung als Bestandteil einer schulischen individuellen Förderung", 2009). This has led to an overflow of variety of career guidance inputs in schools: projects and interventions. Therefore, experts reported that many school-based career guidance users found themselves in the "Maßnahmen-Dschungel" ("activities jungle" – Engl.) defined by a "wide network of providers", "one hand often unaware what the other is doing", "the projects seldom following a uniform facilitation logic", "many schools are reporting problems related to examining the products and to properly classifying them" (Lippegaus-Grünau, Mahl & Stolz, 2010, p. 56). There is no existing evidence on the capabilities of school-based career guidance stakeholders to develop and plan career guidance more systemically and strategically. Especially, there is a lack of research exploring a particular career guidance approach in one school community as a whole.

This dissertation was based on the idea that instead of offering universal one-size-fits-all prescriptions on career guidance implementation and development in schools, we should rather concentrate on individual cases. The aim was to examine and to evaluate how one particular school together with other local stakeholders conceptualize career guidance development and what insufficiencies as well as strengths may be traced from their perceptions.

The main object of the research was career guidance stakeholders' perceptions on career guidance development in the school context and their views on how guidance should be developed. Other objects

include the six factors of successful systemic and strategic thinking by Kaufman (1997, 2006, 2010; Kaufman et al., 2003) to which the perceptions of career guidance stakeholders are compared and later evaluated.

The function of the study was exploration and evaluation of the stakeholders' perceptions based on Kaufman's normative model of strategic and systemic thinking in order to contribute to the scientific literature and to inform the practice of school-based career guidance development. Thus, the main contribution of this dissertation was to demonstrate the importance of mental modeling and strategic and systemic thinking in the multi-stakeholder school-based career guidance development context.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Drawing on the voices of stakeholders this research aimed to provide better understanding on how they perceive implementation, constant development and improvement of school based career guidance and to what extent these perspectives are based on systemic and strategic thinking. The dissertation asked these principal questions:

1.   How schools and their external stakeholders perceive the implementation and constant development of career guidance in the schools context? Particularly, the emphasis was on the view of the principals who have official obligation and primary responsibility for career guidance delivery in schools. Supporting questions were:

a)   what perceived frameworks, models or strategies for development of career guidance may be traced in the perceptions of stakeholders?

b)   to what extent the perceived models and strategies for career guidance development correspond to or are distant from the systemic and strategic thinking defined by the six success factors (CSFs) of strategic and systemic thinking by Kaufman (1997, 2006, 2010); Kaufman et al. (2003).

c)   what are the differences or similarities among different stakeholder perceptions in terms of career guidance development in schools?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

This thesis used system theory as the as meta-paradigm linking ontology, epistemology and philosophy of this research. Cultures, discourses, practices, social groupings, institutions, and individuals are seen as complex open systems as described by Haggis (2008). Based on the open system perspective towards career guidance in schools it was assumed that career guidance aims are broader than tackling problems and closing gaps in needs on the individual level. The systemic complexity of school-based career guidance which is a constituting part of the entire lifelong guidance system was characterized by the following elements:

- Meso/Mega Level Elements – societal interest and policy initiatives.
- Macro Level Elements – organizational elements/organizational dynamics – private firms, schools and other organizations working together in the field.
- Micro Elements – individuals, departments and sections.
- Intra-individual Elements – psycho-physiological development of pupils.
- Multiple processes and inputs at various levels.
- Real-time, non-simulated not experimental settings.
- Aims and objectives are projected through the intertemporal perspective.

The in order to understand how career guidance programs are created, the dissertation used the analysis of theoretical approaches focusing on strategic planning and thinking and mega planning (Kaufman, 1997, 2006, 2010; Kaufman & Grise, 1995; Kaufman & Herman, 1991), program theory (Rogers, 2008) or program logic (Funnell, 1997), theory of action (Patton, 1978, 1990), intervention logic (Nagarajan & Vanheukelen, 1997). The theoretical analysis demonstrated that development of complex interventions such as school based career guidance requires systemic and strategic thinking and modeling skills from those stakeholders who are involved in this task. Further review of scientific literature provided that there are different terms used by researchers to represent the essential characteristics of strategic thinking: "dimensions", "elements", "individual correlates" and "success criteria" (Malan, 2010, p. 29). Kaufman et al. (2003); Kaufman (2006) use the term "factor" to define the capability for strategic thinking and planning; his idea of strategic thinking and planning is expressed by six critical success factors (CSFs). The CSFs (Figure 1) is a unified list of necessary and unavoidable preconditions rather than a collection of separate useful "tips". It has to be understood as a "fabric" and "not a bunch of individual strands", "each one only on its own" (Kaufman, Guerra & Platt, 2006, p. 242) for even if one factor is compromised the whole idea of strategic thinking becomes not valid.

Figure 1: *Six Success Factors for Strategic and Systemic Thinking*

1. Moving out of your comfort zone, involvement of all the stakeholders.

2. Differentiation between ends and means (focus on what but not how).

3. Use and integrate three levels of results – mega, macro, micro.

4. Stating objectives and their measures which signal that the objective has been met (statement of destination and success criteria).

5. Defining need as a gap between current and desired results (not insufficient levels of resources, means or methods).

6. Using ideal vision (Mega) for society as the underlying basis for planning, decision making and continuous improvement.

Source: Kaufman, 1997, 2006, 2010; Kaufman et al., 2003
Note: The phrase "involvement of all the stakeholders" was added to the first factor after the private correspondence and on-line consultations with prof. Kaufman.

This study used the CSFs as a normative and evaluative framework in the attempt to explore the perceived constant development of school based career guidance as well as to evaluate the scope of demonstrated systemic and strategic thinking.

4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

To answer the research questions, the empirical study was implemented as a mixed method research in the German Land of NRW. The data was collected primarily using collective qualitative case study which had an "N of One plus Some" design by Mukhija (2010), with embedded illustrative quantitative on-line survey of 32 school principals. The "N of One plus Some" collective case study focused on one gymnasium type of school in the Land of NRW as the primary case and its internal and external stakeholders in the school-based career guidance field. The internal stakeholders formed subcases and included: 1) the school principal, 2) teachers-career guidance coordinators, 3) pupils and 4) pupils'

parents' representatives. The local external stakeholders were selected based on the theoretical analysis, the initial data from the pilot study and during the on-going data collection in the field. They included: 5) local career counseling services by Federal Employment Agencies, 6) local business organization, a VET provider, 7) local community initiative, a charity foundation's Jury for the seal "Career guidance friendly school", 8) institutions of higher education: local university Student Advise and Counseling (ZSB) department representative, 9) representatives of the local private counseling firm "Gmbh Y" and local freelance career counselor. In total 35 participants took part in the Focus groups, open individual interviews and observation. Additionally, the document analysis of school's internal and external documents related to career guidance implementation and further development was conducted.

The quantitative survey in the frames of PARS (Panel Study at the Research School Education and Capabilities in North Rhine-Westphalia) longitudinal study in the German federal state (Land) North Rhine-Westphalia was conducted simultaneously to the collective case study. The study was implemented by the Institute for School Development Research (IFS) in cooperation with the Research School "Education and Capabilities". The demographical characteristics of the survey participants include school principals representing 32 different types of schools in the German Land of NRW. The entire on-line questionnaire included 34 items and sub-items related to school development and demographical data. From these, 7 items and sub-items (questions from 18-20) were related to career guidance delivery and development in schools.

5. RESULTS

In general, the study provided evidence that career guidance development begins with the mental models in the heads of those who are involved. As the results demonstrated, even in the context of one school different stakeholders might have quite opposite ideas related to career guidance delivery and development. As the study demonstrated, the stakeholders involved in the school-based career guidance development, lack strategic and systemic thinking. Their perceptions of effective career guidance rely largely on input orientation while improvement is perceived as expansion of the "offer" ("Angebot" – Germ.). The other elements of career guidance development: outcomes, purpose and overall logic of the school-based career guidance interventions were seldom discussed and most ambiguously perceived by the interest groups. Thus, assessment and better co-ordination of thinking and mental models in the initial stages of career guidance development, rather than evaluation of what has been already implemented, would allow saving the resources and creating more effective career guidance solutions.

The results of the empirical research confirmed several research propositions.

5.1 School based career guidance development is perceived as triggered by the pressure from environment.

It was found that school based career guidance development is perceived by stakeholders as response to the pressure from environment: *"...der Druck der Eltern ist sowieso so groß, dass man was machen muss..." ["...the pressure from parents is so great, that one must do something..."Individual interview with private career counselor: Transcript]* In order to battle the challenges the school as well as other stakeholders who participated in the research admitted they invest their resources both financial and other type in school based career guidance development. According to the school principal, the school is under pressure from all sides: *"Also eine Schule steht sehr unter Druck von allen Seiten!" ["Well, the school is under much pressure from all sides!"Indivdual interview with the school principal: Transcript]*. The

stakeholders' interest areas or stakes are directly related to the perceived pressure: competition among schools and among universities, ensuring the development and high niveau of own organization, answering the political guidelines, ensuring smooth flow of VET applicants and young employees for own business organization and gaining financial profit.

5.2 Career guidance is perceived by the stakeholders as a multi-stakeholder activity.

The study results confirmed that school based career guidance is perceived as cooperation and intersection of interests of various interest groups. Local business, university, parents, career guidance coordinators, community services and initiatives, FEA, private career guidance counselors and counseling firms all declared their interest zones in the area of career guidance in schools. According to the on-line survey results, school teachers are the most active career guidance developers (67% - are assumed to be strongly involved), which is also confirmed by the qualitative data.

Moreover, apart from naming their own stake, to lesser or greater accuracy and confirmability the stakeholders were able to speculate on the stakes of the other local career guidance interest groups. However, the stakes other than one's own were contemplated mostly by speculative statements even if the stakeholders work together in close cooperation in the same town. Such speculative responses on what could be pupils', pupils' parents or local business firm's stakes in school based career guidance indicates there has been no attempt to assess the needs or stakes of locally involved career guidance partners by direct assessment or measurement. There appears to be a gap in this area. School based career guidance delivery and development remain non-transparent confirming the widely known experts' opinion.

5.3 *School based career guidance development is oriented towards more traditional models of career guidance development: on input and process as well as retrospective evaluations.*

The on-line survey confirmed a wide variety of career guidance offers utilized by the majority of schools which participated in the research. According to the stakeholders' perceptions, collected during the qualitative study, school based career guidance is perceived as "trying out" various career guidance offers or "Angebote" (Germ.) and evaluating them retrospectively by collecting feedback from pupils':

"...also es gibt ganz viele verschiedene Angebote im Bereich Berufsorientierung, die wir dann mhm teilweise auch ausprobieren und die wir dann nachher evaluieren, um herauszufinden, in diesem Fall betrifft die Evaluation meistens die Schüler, mhm ob sie die Schüler weitergebracht hat…" ["Actually, there are so many different offers in the field of career guidance, which we mhm then partially try out and afterwards evaluate in order to find out in this case, the evaluation concerns mostly students, mhm whether these (offers – auth.) have taken the students a step forward..." Focus group with Teachers-career guidance coordinators: Transcript]

Based on such "soft data" feedback on the felt appropriateness and perceived utility of school career guidance activities, these activities are further continued or abolished. Such development resembles a "supermarket" in its development scheme. The offer is made available to the client, and he or she can buy it and taste it depending on likes and dislikes. If some goods (career guidance offers) are not popular among clients (pupils), they are replaced with the new offer. However, the inability to focus on real needs of stakeholders, and the absence of measurable, long-term outcomes in relation to these needs, leads to immeasurability of guidance. Thus, the dominance of more traditional approaches towards thinking on how career guidance should be developed, contradicts the strategic and systemic thinking factors described by Kaufman et al. (2003).

5.4. The stakeholders will demonstrate similar perceptions on career guidance development.

The triangulation of data by data sources: a number of research participants who represented different type and level of interest ensured larger credibility of the research results. In the descriptive sense, there was no single case among the cases which was standing out alone, with a significantly different view of how career guidance is developed in the school context. The overall picture of cases provided a unified perspective. In some instances the perceptions were expressed using the same vocabulary or specific phrases. Nevertheless, the normative enquiry on how school based career guidance should be developed in the future provided some innovative responses which stood out among other cases. For instance, some research participants argued that there should be more outcome related evaluations in school based career guidance which are more pragmatic and focus on real life achievement of pupils. Others agreed that long-term follow up studies would be optimal for tracing the sustainability and success of career guidance interventions offered for pupils. However, it was also stated that such task is rather difficult to implement and is hardly affordable.

6. RECCOMENDATIONS AND RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

It will be beneficial for the further research and practice to continue addressing the problem of systemic and strategic thinking by stakeholders in the area of school-based career guidance development. Due to lack of research which focuses on one institution as open, unique and autonomous complexity, the study purposefully focused on one particular gymnasium together with its local career guidance stakeholders. The decision to investigate career guidance perceptions in one school context was confirmed as positive by the results of the study. The participants of the study believed that schools and their environments in terms of career guidance delivery and development are rather versatile. This makes it difficult to make quantitative comparative judgments. Thus, investigating entire local context of career guidance development in one school is important. More research on single schools is necessary in order to present the voices of stakeholders to understand how they perceive implementation, constant development, and improvement of school-based career guidance, and see how far these perspectives draw on systemic and strategic thinking. Such research could serve as the basis for the strategic and systemic thinking interventions offered for school career guidance stakeholders. Such interventions would help to create the alignment in the ideas and mental models of stakeholders in order to ensure creation of more efficient and improved career guidance programs.

The study had several limitations. The first limitation of this study is that the findings presented here are specific to the cases described and cannot be generalized to other populations in the statistical sense.

The second limitation of the empirical study is that it cannot answer all important aspects, related to the research problem and research questions. Despite the design of the study and its methodology which incorporated in-depth individual interviews and extensive Focus groups, there are limits to respondents' willingness, ability or readiness to provide answers which are detailed enough and appropriate for building a significant proof relevant to answering the research questions.

The third limitation lies in the researcher's unavoidable subjectivity in interpreting the data in order to obtain results. A researcher chooses what to ask and what to record which data segments to retrieve, constantly weighting the data and presuming its significance. The ability to collect and interpret the data is more congested particularly in the cross-language and cross-cultural research settings. Therefore the findings of this research do not fall into the category of "completely objective" findings, particularly in the positivist sense.

The forth limitation is related to the complexity of the examined. It is difficult to present such complexity in a simple, linear manner of interview data, which has to be logically and linguistically comprehensible and even more so, elegantly written and easy to read.

The fifth limitation is related to the sample selection. The school which was chosen as a primary case was allowed to prepare their own sample of parents and pupils who later participated in the Focus groups. However, the school had only very limited information on the interview content, thus it was avoided that the school might have prepared or influenced participants' response in some other way.

The sixth limitation is related to the quantitative survey of school principals embedded in the qualitative research. The results of the quantitative survey are of exploratory character in order to obtain a better insight of the local context of school based career guidance, particularly due to researcher's non-native background as well as to add confidence to the qualitative study results. The results of the study cannot be understood as a statistical research, it is rather a limited and bounded complementary survey which provides a wider illustration and additional explanatory strength for qualitative findings.

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