



Parental Involvement in Career Education and Guidance in Senior General Secondary Schools in the Netherlands

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This paper is an overview of some of the salient findings emerging from Dr. Annemarie Oomen's recently concluded PhD at the University of Derby.

My thesis is the result of a research examining the involvement of the parents of secondary school children in career education and guidance (CEG). It is based on a secondary analysis of existing data from a research project I was involved in. This initial research evaluated the impact of a parent-involved career intervention, *Parents Turn*, in which six career teachers delivered four successive sessions to parent(s) accompanied by their child in the third or fifth year of their secondary school preparing for higher education (HE) in the Netherlands.

Backdrop

This study is important both to the field and to practitioners. Examples of parent-involved career intervention in CEG are limited, scantily researched, and most were not sustained, which may explain why knowledge on involving parents in CEG is underdeveloped.

In my study I discuss these gaps in the evidence by providing relevant knowledge on parental involvement in education in general, and an overview on the literature on parental influences and roles in their child's career development. Parents and/or family appear to be important influencers and advisers at each stage of life. This includes childhood, adolescence, and young adults starting working life and a family of their own. In

and outside the educational context, interventions to involve parents more in adolescents' career development can be found in the literature over the last six decennia. In the taxonomy I developed, I arranged the internationally designed interventions into three models: (a) career information-centred; (b) family learning; and (c) family therapy (Oomen, 2016).

The Intervention

In the Netherlands, at the end of primary education, at the age of twelve, the results of a compulsory standardised skills test to measure school performances, together with an educational report by the teacher on the most suitable type of secondary education for that child, determines the track for a student to enter secondary education. This is either a vocational track (International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2, four years), preparing for technical college (ISCED 3 and 4), or an academic track: senior general secondary education (HAVO) (ISCED 3 and 4, five years) or pre-university education (VWO) (ISCED 3 and 4, six years). About 50% of students go to the vocational or the academic track. In the third year of the academic track students choose one of the four subject-clusters: science and technology, science and health, social studies and economics, or social studies and culture.

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Each cluster consists of common core subjects and some optional subjects, which indicate what the emphasis will be in the last phase of the secondary track before leaving school. The diplomas of HAVO and VWO grant students access to higher education (HE) (ISCED 6 and 7), although additional requirements may be imposed by HE programmes on students, such as restriction in medicine and arts.

The parent-involved career intervention, Parents Turn, was a government-funded family-learning project directed to the academic stream of Dutch secondary education. The career teachers of six senior general secondary schools (HAVO) around the Netherlands were involved in the project. Dutch career teachers are teachers in academic subjects who take up the additional task of supporting students in the mandatory CEG provision. In their role as career leaders they also support tutors and teachers in delivering the CEG provision in their school. Each career teacher involved in the project delivered the career intervention, following an extensive, co-designed script for each of the four sessions – as will be explained below – with the support of tutors, teachers, and heads of department at their schools.

Pairs of parent(s) and child(ren) volunteered for four successive monthly sessions (ten hours in total), which took place in the school after classes, between September and December 2012. Three schools delivered the intervention in the third year ($n = 92$) while preparing 14- to 16-year-olds for one of the four subject-cluster choices. The other three schools delivered the intervention in the fifth and final year ($n = 83$) while preparing 16- to 18-year-olds to choose HE options.

Beforehand, in four day-sessions, the career teachers and I discussed the results of a needs assessment among potential participating parents in these six schools. We set the objectives for the career intervention which aimed to support parents to facilitate their children's career building by helping them to be (a) up-to-date and well-informed about educational

possibilities and their financial consequences, the labour market and the use of information resources; and (b) able to make considered career decisions with their child. We decided on the outline and co-created the scripts for each of the four sessions of the career intervention. The career intervention was designed as a learning activity for parents interacting with their child (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). The physical presence of both parent(s) and the child facilitated family-learning. Parents as well as senior students from upper secondary and first-year HE alumni students served as resources, reflecting the diverse nature of the wider school-community to realise community-interaction (Law, 1981). Table 1 provides an overview of the programme.

My secondary analysis approaches to the existing data included new research questions, in-depth analyses, and a non-parametric methodology. I integrated the quantitative and qualitative results to understand who was involved in the intervention, why, and whether the impact differed for the learning of parents with and without HE qualifications. I also sought to understand the role of the school in the intervention.

Results

The findings suggest that a school-initiated career intervention involving parents, in the form of family learning and community interaction, can build and enhance parents' capacity to be involved in and support the career development of their child. This parental capacity consists not only of their knowledge and skills to handle the information on HE, but also – as suggested by the parental-involvement literature -- of their parental self-efficacy and their parental role-definition (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Parental self-efficacy refers to the judgement or confidence of parents of being able to organise and execute actions to attain certain aims, that is, 'I, as a parent, can do this'. Parental role-definition is what parents perceive as expected or assumed as a parent in their child's career development.

Table 1. Overview of the career intervention's programme

| Session | Focus |
|---------|---|
| 1 | How the needs analysis outcomes informed the design of the sessions; The role(s) parents perceive for school staff in CEG and vice versa; The school's aim and activities in CEG in general and this year; Do's and don'ts for parents in talking with their child and practicing simple steps to initiate a conversation. |
| 2 | The non-linear nature of career development; Speed dating activity with parent answering the questions of students about their career development; Exploring in-depth the child's strengths and interests; Reliable tests and how to discuss test results. |
| 3 | Dilemmas in career choice making; Current information: upcoming choices, trends in HE enrolment/access; Experience-sharing by older students about career-decision-making; Comparing and using career exploration websites. |
| 4 | Study costs and (financial) issues related to HE study; Provisional study choices by students; Drafting a plan of follow-up steps. |

The parents involved, increased their information level; increased their parental self-efficacy in making use of information, and of guidance and support tools; changed their parental attitudes and skills; talked more to their child and learned how to do that; became more aware of their role and their child's; and felt more able to support their child in career decision-making. The findings of impact are relevant as studies show that family/parents' emotional and autonomy support their encouragement influence (Carter, 2002; Whiston & Keller, 2004), which further supports their development of self-directed exploration (Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006).

However, the career intervention works differently for parents who have different levels of HE level attainment. Parents differ in their initial needs to be involved. Parents who are both HE qualified are involved in being updated and getting an understanding of how the conditions for applying for clusters and HE studies have changed to support and help their child in career decision-making. On the other hand, for lower-educated parents, that is those without their own experiences in this type of secondary education and/or HE, involvement in the career intervention

primarily and in the first place serves for their own self-assurance.

Lower educated parents were less present in the third-year compared to the fifth-year career intervention. This seems to be related to being less aware of the importance and impact of early educational choices on their child's career development. This is a new finding next to well-known findings for this particular group of parents. The research literature shared the finding that lower educated parents are being hard to encourage to participate in parental involvement sessions (Jónsdóttir, 2013). Also research found these parents avoiding activities directed to all parents (Katznelson & Pless, 2007), or plenary sessions with other parents. (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; cf. Semple, 1993).

Despite the impact of the career intervention on their parental capacity, lower-educated parents remain unsure as a parent of how to make use of gained information, guidance, and support tools. This lower parental self-efficacy can be related to the unsureness found in general for lower-educated in the Netherlands (Van den Brink, 2002). Also, I perceive the observed pattern as an illustration of the

secondary effects of social origin relating to parents' educational decisions causing inequalities of educational opportunity as shown in Nordic countries and the Netherlands. This sociological perspective points to explaining inequalities by the mechanism of (a) risk aversion and (b) time-discounting preferences (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Morgan, 2005). Children from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds show, on average, higher aspirations in the educational choices they make. They aim to go on to HE, especially if their parents did so, even if their actual educational attainment in school is modest and there is a risk of failure in HE. They tend to end up with higher levels of attainment, but they and their parents tend also to look at the whole future educational- and work-career that follows. In contrast, children with the same level of school attainment but from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will be less motivated to take such risks. Short-term motivations and current academic performance dominate their educational choices. These students are more averse to choosing an academically challenging track (Goldthorpe, 2010). Students' high time-discount rate (i.e., short-term horizon) is due to the pressure on students to leave school relatively early to contribute to family income or own earnings, related to the lower levels of economic resources in their families. Students from higher SES origin are less affected by risk aversion, due to a lower time-discount rate, that is, a longer-term horizon (Breen, Van de Werfhorst, & Jaeger, 2014).

Parents without HE experiences did benefit less from the community interaction component of the career intervention. I suggest this is related to the found unsureness socially for the lower-educated (Van den Brink, 2002). In the sessions, these parents meet equality and not the authority they seek. It may be that they unconsciously want to put the responsibility

for the ultimate decision with the authority: the school.

Parents without HE experiences did benefit less from the family-learning component of the career intervention. I suggest this is related to the nature of the parent-child exercises in the career intervention, which assume reflective, meta-cognitive, active listening skills, which these parents may not have learned or trained in as these skills were not necessary in their occupation. This may explain why these parents also benefited less from the impact of the career intervention on the parent-child bond and/or at-home involvement.

Subcultural differences, related to HE attainment, were also found for various dimensions of parental role definitions of being involved and supporting their child's career development. For instance, compared to parents who are both HE-educated, third-year parents without HE experiences show a significantly lower mean rank for the statement: "I am aware what are the strengths and weaknesses of my child."

The study also finds that features of the present school system are major barriers to sustaining the intervention. Recommendations for policies and practices at school level are offered. A more focused public policy for parental involvement in career education and guidance in secondary schools could both improve the efficiency of the education system and combat social injustice. A parent-involved career intervention in secondary education is an educational innovation, and should be dealt with as such. Moving forward, it is important to develop stronger models for parental engagement in career guidance and its implementation, alongside an accompanying research agenda.

About the author

Annemarie Oomen, in 1989, after practicing careers work for over 15 years in secondary schools, joined APS, the National Center for School Improvement, an NGO in the Netherlands. She developed and introduced various concepts and implementation strategies to integrate career education and guidance into education and worked as an (international) consultant for schools, (non) governmental organisations and Ministries.

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