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## Finding the Way into VET – Career Education

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### Abstract

**Context:** The standing of VET depends on a multitude of factors and differs significantly between countries and regions. This also impacts access to VET and whether students see VET as an option to continue their education and training or to start their careers. Students typically transition into VET either after the lower secondary or the upper secondary level. It is a transition from school to VET, and from an individual perspective, it is a transformation. There is a sound body of scientific work looking at the transition from school to work from different perspectives (e.g., policy, economy, and sociological perspectives). An often-neglected focus is on the challenges students face, the transformations they undergo in the transition, and the support they receive from parents and teachers in this situation.

**Approach:** We use data from two studies, a cross-sectional study with students heading towards a specialized school on the upper secondary level, [www.infosetting-bl.ch](http://www.infosetting-bl.ch). And a longitudinal study at [www.digibe.ch](http://www.digibe.ch), where we follow students at the lower secondary level over three years. The study started in autumn 2022, so the students are now in autumn 2023 at the beginning of their third year. The project focuses on reflection and transformation in and through career planning. In this paper, we report the first results on how parents and teachers were involved when irritating situations occurred in career planning.

**Findings:** We find that the role of teachers and parents is multifaceted, including guidance, support, and counselling. Both studies show, however, that teachers and parent rarely focus on future-oriented interventions; at least from the perspective of the students.

**Conclusion:** Career education is a concept that fits better to frame the work a teacher does in supporting their students in career planning. Two aims in career education are of high relevance: fighting the stereotypes many students have about iVET and VET and their ability to cope with irritating situations in career planning and career choice processes.

**Keywords:** transition, transformation, career education

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## 1 Pathways into VET

The standing of iVET and VET differs substantially between countries and regions, taking into account common indicators such as the prestige of vocational education and training (VET) or the involvement of private partners (Stalder & Lüthi, 2020). This also impacts the enrolment in iVET and pathways to VET. Teachers, parents, and training companies are important gatekeepers young people need to rely on in their career planning, as they have no work experience. Formally, getting into iVET/VET is a transition from school to work, and it is, at the same time, a transformation of one's career-related knowledge and skills and vocational identity and personality (Stalder & Nägele, 2015). It is the first important step in designing a sustainable and self-determined career.

VET is, in many countries, seen as the optimal way to integrate young people with low skills that are hard to educate and train or who have physical or mental handicaps. In other countries, VET offers sustainable educational and career pathways also to very talented young people. Often, iVET and VET are seen as an opportunity to support the local economy, fight youth unemployment, or give all young people access to work and is therefore also a policy issue (Bonoli & Vorpe, 2022). However, we see more reports from different countries that VET becomes less attractive – or less chosen by young people – compared to academic educational pathways (e.g., BIBB, 2023; Billett et al, 2022).

Education systems and policies shape pathways into iVET/VET. It is a trivial statement that education systems differ, as they are always embedded in and shaped by regional and country-specific contexts. Regardless of these particularities, there are some commonalities in career planning in young people. First, teachers and parents play an important role in shaping a student's educational pathway (Stalder et al., 2023, in this volume). Second, from an individual's perspective, moving from school to work is a development and learning process that leads not only to the acquisition of career-related knowledge and skills but also changes the individual and her or his personality.

Career planning of young people relies on the support of others, mainly parents, teachers, career counsellors or training companies (Von Wyl et al., 2018). The parents' social origin can alter career options significantly, besides other factors such as school marks (Ohlemann, 2021). Without support from career counsellors or teachers, young people, e.g. tend to make career decisions that are heavily biased by their social origin or the socio-economic status of their family (Hirschi, 2009). Supporting young people in their career planning is also a way to fight inequality in educational pathways and career planning.

This is the background against which young people start planning their careers, typically at the lower or upper secondary school level. From an individual perspective, it is ideally a question of becoming and shaping the vocational career in accordance with life planning. Students should reflect on and make sense of their career planning. But reflection is not a self-running process (Hell, 2009). And as all these changes can touch the core identity of a person, it is transformative learning. This is complicated as a person has to deal with „the most significant and decisive linking between the individual and society and at the same time of crucial importance for the understanding of learning in general and of transformative learning in particular” (Illeris, 2014, p. 155).

It is, therefore, important to address questions on how young people find their way into iVET/VET whilst they are still in school. This paper reports on two studies that look at how young people see their pathway into iVET. Study one focuses on how young people heading towards an academic track distance themselves from the option iVET, and study two looks at the interaction and exchange they have with their parents.

## 1.1 From career counselling to career education

In many countries, a lot of effort is invested in guiding young people into iVET/VET. Often, career counsellors and teachers play a crucial role in this process (Stalder et al., 2023). Generally, career counselling aims at establishing „a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (Kaplan et al., 2014, p. 368). If it comes to the transition from school to work, either on the lower or upper secondary school level, we see that career counselling is mainly directed at getting young people into education and work, as was already the case years ago (Heinz et al., 1985). This makes sense, as the pathway to VET is in many countries regulated, aiming at integrating young people into work (Bonoli & Vorpe, 2022).

There is often less emphasis on developing an individual’s perspective, identity and career outlook. The focus is on getting employable. As Guichard (2022) puts it, this kind of counselling aims at the „sole final purpose of helping people enter the job market and manage their employability and careers” (p. 133). One reason for that is that employability, for good reasons, is given high attention. Consequently, tools that help to narrow down career decisions quickly are in high demand. These can be, e.g., tools of the family of self-guided career exploration techniques (Spokane & Holland, 1995), based on Holland’s theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1959). Again, these are perfect tools if we aim to help young people develop their employability and to help them to integrate into jobs (Guichard, 2022) or, in the case of iVET, into job-related educational programmes.

But, one aspect is often missing (Nägele et al., 2022), as career interventions should not only aim at „(a) finding relevant information to direct paths ..., (b) constructing adaptable self-constructs for employability” but also (c) „to clarifying what gives long-term meaning and reflecting on the role and place of work in their lives” (Young & Mundy, 2023, p. 86). This idea also goes back to Super and the life span and life space career development (Super, 1980). During life, in time and space, an individual has different roles and activities. Giving meaning to a career, making a career narratable (Savickas et al., 2009) consequently needs to be positioned within the frame of the personal life. If we aim at empowering young people to shape their careers actively, career education should aim at fostering individual reflection in a world with an unpredictable future and a fast-changing economy (Guichard, 2022). The discussion on the impact of AI on the economy and jobs and the high demands imposed on an individual’s competencies makes it even more relevant.

It, therefore, becomes highly relevant for VET how young people are supported in finding access to iVET/VET. We often find interventions aiming at (a) finding information or (b) becoming employable, at least in the Swiss-German context (Nägele & Schneitter, 2016). A picture that, according to Guichard (2022), can be found in many countries. To work on the (c) long-term meaning is often harder. A student’s question, „What do I want to become?” needs to shift to the question, „How do I learn to think and build a sustainable career?”. It is about sense-making and reflection and designing a career (Savickas et al., 2009).

If it comes to education, teachers often slip into the role of coordinators or career counsellors and often also into the role of parents at the same time. But can they or should they be kind of counsellors? The core competencies of teachers are education and training. So, the more appropriate term would be career education. Career education aims at providing „students with opportunities to gain diverse insights into the multiple ways in which social, political and economic discourses shape and position concepts of self, career, opportunity and justice” (Irving, 2010, p. 15). Career education is about building future-oriented competencies that allow people to adapt to changes in their educational pathway and work. The focus is on preparing individuals to design their careers (Marciniak et al., 2020). If it comes to education, teachers often slip into the role of coordinators, career counsellors and often also into the role of parents at the same time. But can they or should they be kind of counsellors? The core competencies of

teachers are education and training. So, the more appropriate term would be career education. Career education aims at providing „students with opportunities to gain diverse insights into the multiple ways in which social, political and economic discourses shape and position concepts of self, career, opportunity and justice” (Irving, 2010, p. 15). Career education is about building future-oriented competencies that allow people to adapt to changes in their educational pathway and work. The focus is on preparing individuals to design their careers (Marciniak et al., 2020).

In the transition from school to work, there is often a high pressure – imposed by the individual, parents, society, or economy – to find further education or employment. It is, therefore, for many teachers important to support and consult students based on their individual needs with the aim of helping them cope with the current situation and to lead them to a connecting solution in education and training (Nägele et al., 2022). This is, however, not career education, but career counselling, as individuals are enabled in a given moment „to cope with a problem that is specific for them” (Guichard, 2001, p. 157). Career guidance aims to unleash the vocational potential of an individual for the person itself and the world at large (Perera & Athanasou, 2019, p. 1).

At first sight, it is compelling to ask teachers to guide and coach their students on their pathway through education and training and into VET. But coaches typically act on the request of a client. It is the client who searches for support from a counsellor if something significant changes and if he feels the need to be supported (Lang-von Wins & Triebel, 2012). This kind of freely chosen relationship is not given between students and teachers. Furthermore, coaching asks for a profound education and training that is not part of teacher education.

Career planning, learning and development are embedded in different ecological contexts (school, family, society, culture (environments in the sense of Bronfenbrenner, 1986 as developmental contexts). There are many forces wanting young people to continue their education and training and pushing them into work. Education is the way to achieve that.

## 1.2 Relevance to VET

Career management requires more and more self-management skills with the ability to be self-directed, value-driven, and flexible (Hirschi & Koen, 2021). Furthermore, we see that pathways from school to work are diverse and not always linear (Nägele & Stalder, 2017). In Switzerland, for example, this is reflected in statistics and studies on educational pathways (Laganà & Babel, 2018), on drop-out from apprenticeship (Deppierraz, 2021; Schmid & Stalder, 2012; Stalder & Schmid, 2016), or statistical numbers showing a lot of changes and movement not only in iVET on the lower secondary but also in transition from academic education on the lower secondary to the tertiary level and within the first years on the tertiary level (Wolter et al., 2023).

Topical conceptions of curricula in iVET and VET are competence-oriented and demand a high degree of self-directed learning, not only in developing vocational competencies, but also in planning continuing or higher education (Nägele et al., 2018).

We miss a chance if career guidance at schools focuses mainly – and often only – on getting young people into a specific job. Reflection, critical thinking and also, learning how to handle one’s career should be as present in the career choice process. In the Swiss context, the need to develop these career competencies was expressed by many cantons in a nationwide survey (Nägele & Schneitter, 2016). Interestingly, in the French part of Switzerland, it was more stressed that young people need to develop citizenship behaviour and the need to reflect critically on how to become a member of society. In the Swiss-German part of Switzerland, the focus was clearly on getting a job. These differences may be subtle but represent the two ways of thinking that Guichard (2022) positions as developing skills to start and maintain a career versus supporting young people in getting a job. The latter has a narrower focus on doing a transition but

underestimates the transformative processes of an individual that are needed to develop from a student to a self-reflective and self-directed learner with respect to professional and career-related competencies.

## **2 Case studies**

In the following part, we will present the voices of students at the lower secondary school level that show how they see the standing of iVET compared to the academic track and how they interact with parents and teachers in case of irritating experiences during the vocational choice process. It is a first glance at the data. These are examples of challenges that should be addressed in career education when working with students.

### **2.1 The standing of VET**

In a prior presentation on young people's reasoning and career decisions in favour of a school-based education instead of apprenticeship training (iVET) in a Swiss-German canton (Nägele & Rodcharoen, 2018), we showed, based on a sample of 615 students in grade 11, aged 15 to 16, that many young people wanting to access an upper secondary specialized school (academic track), have often very negative and stereotypical views on iVET and VET. Although vocational orientation is a school subject in the lower secondary, students tell us that they have no idea about options to continue their education and training in iVET. Two-thirds of these students have only very vague educational and vocational goals. Asked about their career decisions, many students simply told us that they like going to school and do not see iVET as a desirable alternative. They see iVET as mostly oriented towards developing practical skills, not allowing them to develop competencies on which they can build their career. One student put it like that: „The daily work makes it less attractive; I couldn't go on with 'normal' school and experience everyday school life". Some say that trainers and teachers in iVET are not competent, as they would have no training to educate young people. Teachers at schools in the academic track, on the other side, would be trained to support their student's educational advancement. Of course, iVET trainers and teachers are educated and trained, but this seems not to be known to many students. Asked whether they could imagine attending iVET instead of attending the academic, school-based track, most of these students deny it, as they see mainly negative aspects like the need to work for an employer, the need to work for long hours, with less free time and holidays, or also the risk to get dirty hands when working manually. One student told us that he hopes he will never be in that situation, as he would be extremely disappointed in himself.

This shows that even in a country with a long-standing tradition and generally a high reputation of VET, VET has only little support from talented young people. For these young people, it is not self-evident that they could also head towards apprenticeship training to start their careers. They have grades allowing them to continue their education on the academic track. So, they do it.

### **2.2 Parents and Teacher**

In the ongoing project [www.digibe.ch](http://www.digibe.ch), students were asked to report on irritating situations in the career choice process (Nägele et al., 2022). There is a total of 2'290 irritating situations reported by the participating students within a two-year observation period. Out of these situations, 50% triggered reflection about career planning and own emotions. 33% were linked to curricular activities such as attending work experience days or writing applications. 17%, N = 349 of the reported irritating situations were on interaction issues with parents 26%, N = 104, teachers, 4%, N = 16, peers, 6%, N = 23 and significant others 64%, N = 251. Overall, we see that if it comes to an irritating situation making young people think about that situation for a

longer time or discuss it with other people, it seldom comes from within the family or from within the school. We cannot conclude that children and parents do not speak about career planning. But it is seldom something that leads to a longer-lasting irritation that's worth to be reported. Situations reported can be neutral, e.g. „I had to decide what occupations are of interest to me; I had to ask my parents to sort it out” (HLDAE), negative from the perspective of the young person, e.g. „My father only talks to me when it is about my future jobs” (VADHV), „My parents looked at me strangely when I told them that I wanted to attend a school on the upper secondary level. They told me that I had to do an apprenticeship training and then later attend courses in continuing education” (ODCSR), or positive, e.g. „I was confused after an appointment with a career counsellor, as he mentioned many more educational options than I expected. I discussed it with parents and relatives, which was very helpful” (TFHJV). The important point here is that we see the mechanism of how parents influence their children's decisions. In most situations reported by students, they are engaged in a „neutral” discussion with their parents (74%, N = 77). „Neutral” means that children and parents openly discuss issues without parents pushing their child in a specific direction. The advantages and disadvantages of certain occupations are discussed. Positive situations are when a solution pops up in the interaction with parents when the next step becomes possible, 17%, N = 18. And there are only very few reports about quarrels with parents, 9%, N = 9.

If it comes to irritating situations with teachers that were reported, they were even fewer than with parents. Situations are, e.g., when a teacher tries to convince a student not to attend an apprenticeship training (iVET) but to go to a gymnasium (academic track), or teachers that first tell students trying to realize the dream job and later tell them, that they need to take whatever is available to them. Situations with teachers are reported when they make a harsh intervention or if they make statements that are seen as contradictory by students. It is interesting to note that this is in line with the view students have about their teachers if we ask them explicitly about the role their teacher has. We present the first results on that in the paper of Stalder, Gaupp and Nägele (2023, in this volume).

### 3 Conclusion

In a school context, the concept of career education seems to be compelling. It can serve as an umbrella term integrating career guidance, coaching and similar adapted to the core competencies of a teacher. There is a tendency, exemplified with reference to Guichard (2022) career support tends to solve current problems, which is the transition from school to work. Investing in the ability of young people to design their careers and develop future-oriented competencies often comes off too short. Developing these competencies relies on students' reflection and on their career planning and transformative learning processes. Career planning is a biographical long-term project (Ertl, 2023), and reflection helps to sustainably promote other career interventions (Kunert & Sommer, 2023; Stalder et al., 2022).

Career education has, amongst others, the aim, at least in Switzerland, to reduce the stereotypical view of vocational education and training. This is especially the case for students with academic achievements that allow them to either attend the vocational or academic track. Otherwise, iVET/VET will become less and less attractive for this group of young people. Second, career education should address handling critical situations in career planning. It cannot be the task of a teacher to solve these problems, but it must be the task of a teacher to educate and train their students to cope with these situations themselves.

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