



Swedish Career Counsellor Students' Descriptions of their Future Professional Identity

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyse how Swedish students in their final semester of a career counsellor programme describe their future professional identity based on experiences from their education and from participating in counsellor activities. The study builds on qualitative interviews with 23 career counsellor programme students. Professional identity theories are used as the theoretical framework. The results show that through the theoretical part of their education students acquired a special combination of knowledge, abilities and approaches they perceived the professional culture requires, which they described in a coherent manner. The students expressed loyalty to the person being counselled, a desire to behave neutrally as well as to pay attention to and counteract one's own and societal norms and structures in the conversation as important parts of the professional identity.

ABSTRAKT

Syftet med studien är att analysera hur svenska studenter som läser sista terminen på studie- och yrkesvägledarprogram beskriver sin kommande professionella identitet utifrån sina erfarenheter från utbildningen och vägledande verksamhet. Studien bygger på kvalitativa intervjuer med 23 studenter. Som teoretiskt ramverk används Professionella identitetsteorier. Resultatet visar att studenterna genom den teoretiska delen av sin utbildning tillägnat sig en speciell kombination av kunskaper, förmågor och förhållningssätt som de upplevt att yrkeskulturen kräver, vilket de beskrev på ett samstämmigt sätt. Studenterna uttryckte en lojalitet mot den som vägleds, en vilja att alltid förhålla sig neutralt liksom att uppmärksamma och motverka egna och samhälleliga normer och strukturer i samtalet som viktiga delar av den professionella identiteten.

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This article is about what Swedish students studying for university education in career counselling perceive they should be able to know, do, and be in their future profession. Pursuing a university education can be seen as the beginning of professional development, encompassing the acquisition of specialised knowledge as well as the skills, values, and perspectives inherent in the profession (Reid et al., 2008). Higher education thus plays a significant role in learning and forming a professional identity that includes students' notions of the profession's demands. By learning about fundamental principles, theories, and best practices in their field, students establish a knowledge foundation and an understanding of their future profession, simultaneously becoming socialised into its norms and values, both intended and unintended (Dent, 2017; Valutis et al., 2012). Learning a profession thus takes place through an integration of knowing, acting, and being a "practitioner."

In 2004, McCarthy noted that it is surprising how little attention has been paid to issues of education, skills, and qualifications for counsellors, considering that education is expected to influence both professional behaviour, evolution of the profession and clients' counselling experiences. Although more research has been added since 2004 (e.g., Allan & Moffett, 2016; Andreassen et al., 2019; Bimrose & Brown, 2019; Lara et al., 2010; Neary, 2014), research on career guidance students' learning of the profession is still scarce and students' perceptions of their future professional identity have not been fully investigated. By analysing students own descriptions of the character traits and competencies they associate with the profession, we can gain valuable insights that are central to developing educational programmes and, in the long term, promoting professional practice.

In the article, the term "professional" is used in a general sense and refers to the specific tasks, attitudes, and knowledge that students require in their professional practice.

CAREER COUNSELLOR EDUCATION

At an international level, the career counsellor education options have multiplied in recent decades, and there is a great variety in structure, content, and quality (Hiebert & Neault, 2014). There are also significant differences in training time, which can vary from a couple of weeks up to five years, and what often distinguishes the various training courses is their relationship to psychology and teaching (McCarthy, 2004). In some countries, such as several Nordic countries, it is educated teachers with a specialist degree in career counselling who are responsible for counselling in educational settings (Plant, 2003). In other countries, such as France and Portugal, a specialisation in psychology is instead required (McCarthy, 2004). Those who work with counselling then have a great variety of previous professional backgrounds (Hiebert & Neault, 2014). Career counsellors also work in varying settings and varying qualification requirements exist in different countries (McCarthy, 2004).

The Swedish education programmes is a university education at first cycle, comprising 180 credits and leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in career counselling. The programme syllabus is based on general provisions formulated in the Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434) as well as nationally established qualitative targets that are governed by the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) and which are specific to the programme. The overall qualitative target is for the students to have the knowledge and abilities required to work independently as counsellors within the education system. The emphasis of the programme includes theories and methods in the career counsellor field, but it also includes placement and social science and behavioural science perspectives on the individual and society (SACO, 2021).

The education is offered both on campus and at a distance at three Swedish universities (Malmö, Stockholm, Umeå), and prior to autumn 2022, there were 965 first-choice applicants for the approximately 280 places offered nationally (Swedish council for higher education, 2022). The education attracts a greater proportion of women than men — approximately 80% of applicants at national level are women. The applicants are also distinguished by the fact that the majority are 25 years of age or older at the time of admission to the programme, which means that many have already worked professionally and/or have another qualification before they apply.

Most guidance in Sweden is offered within schools and other educational institutions, but there are also municipalities that offer guidance through external, central guidance centres. Guidance is also offered via a publicly funded web service. The current 2011 curriculum states that primary and secondary schools are responsible for ensuring that all pupils can make well-founded choices for their continued education and professional orientation (Skolverket, 2013). Everyone who works in school is also expected to contribute to ensuring that pupils' educational and career choices are not limited by gender or by social or cultural background. The counsellors, have a specific responsibility for informing and guiding pupils towards their continued education and vocational orientation. They must especially focus on opportunities for pupils with disabilities and, in addition, assist teachers in their efforts. A basic principle is that counselling must be offered and available to all pupils regardless of background. (Skolverket, 2013).

The management of a school's career counselling consists of overarching goals in school law, on the basis of which each municipality and school must formulate their own local goals (SFS 2010:800). Report shows that local education authorities and principals tend to devolve responsibility for how the counselling should be conducted to the local counsellor (Skolinspektionen, 2013). There are therefore significant differences in how counselling is offered and conducted in Swedish schools, as well as differences in quality (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). In many municipalities, clear governing documents that regulate working methods and objectives are scarce, which in a sense gives counsellors room to influence their practice based on their own professional autonomy (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022). Dresch & Lovén (2003) point out that this can also contribute to them feeling insecure in their professional role due to a lack of consensus regarding what a counsellor does and should do.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The starting point of this study is that attending a professional education is not only about learning knowledge and skills but also about identifying oneself as a professional practitioner within the vocation (Heggen, 2008). During their education, career counsellor students produce and reproduce ideas and perceptions about themselves in their professional role and who they want to be as a practitioner. Within this process, students begin to think of themselves as counsellors and integrate the skills, attitudes, qualities, and values that they perceive characterises a good professional practitioner (Gibson et al., 2012). In the best case, the personal perception of what characterises this role will agree with the profession's collective institutional self-understanding of what distinguishes good professional practice (Heggen, 2008).

The development of a professional identity occurs gradually, and several different components contribute to this development. The education, for example, aims to provide through its curriculum, the knowledge and perspectives that will enable students to learn the abilities, values, attitudes, and ways of thinking that are considered professionally appropriate in counsellor practice (cf. Gibson et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2020). During the placement period of the programme, students' learning is challenged when they are confronted with the culture of the practice, with norms and values and special ways of working that may differ from what they previously learned (Lamote & Engels, 2010). To conduct counselling 'for real' yourself may require a redefinition of what it means to be a counsellor who challenges students to further explore their professional identity. During their education, the students therefore encounter the views of both university lecturers and active counsellors about what constitutes the role, competence, and professional behaviour. Students may notice tensions between different viewpoints and interests when encountering different ways of thinking about counselling (cf. Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). They may therefore have to relate to and negotiate between an ideal reality that is conveyed via their university teachers and a practical reality in authentic practice.

The student's social and cultural background, life history and previous professional experiences also have an impact on their identity. The student's background and previous experiences will influence what is perceived to be important and less important knowledge and what may also

be considered invalid knowledge as a result of already established perceptions (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Heggen, 2008). Based on the students' differences, they will therefore to some extent learn or grasp different things during their education. Even this personal aspect of their learning provides ideas and thoughts about what it means to be a professional. The development of a professional identity is therefore an ongoing learning process of interpretations and reinterpretations of experiences that include perceptions of the type of counsellor the student wants to become (cf. Lamote & Engels, 2010).

The aim of this article is to examine *Formulärets överkant* how Swedish students in their final semester of a university career counselling programme describe their future professional identity based on experiences from their education and from participating in career counselling activities in the workplace. The students' descriptions of what it means to be a counsellor were analysed and the analysis focuses on what the students believe a counsellor should be able to know and do and how one should act in the professional role, as well as how they describe the relationship to the person being guided.

METHOD

The study is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted in the spring of 2019 with 23 students who were in their last semester of the career counsellor programme at Malmö and Stockholm universities in Sweden. The participants in the study were distributed throughout country, and therefore, 12 interviews were conducted via telephone using the speaker function, while 11 were conducted via physical meetings. The students themselves chose whether they wanted to have the interview over the phone or in a physical meeting. Conducting qualitative interviews via telephone is sometimes described in the literature as a worse alternative than interviews in a physical meeting (Glogowska et al., 2011). However, other research shows that telephone interviews, although tending to be a little shorter, provide the same data richness and only fairly small differences in data depth (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). The choice to conduct part of the interviews via telephone in this study was based on the fact that this was a prerequisite for some students to be able to participate in the study. Offering a telephone interview as a solution, meant that more students could participate, which would benefit the study, and this was considered a priority.

The participants at one university were invited to the study through an email to students registered on a course given during the last semester of the programme. They were asked to register their interest via email directly to the researcher. The participants at the other university were invited by posting information about the study on a learning platform aimed at the target group. They were asked to register their interest in the same way as the other participants. All students who responded were contacted and we agreed on how and when the interview would be conducted. Everyone who registered their interest then participated in the study, and no further selections were made. The study includes two men and 21 women with an age range of between 24–56 years, which also reflects the gender and age distribution of the programmes.

Prior to the interviews, students were informed both in writing and verbally that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. They provided either written or verbally recorded consent. Since the study does not collect sensitive data regarding race, ethnicity, health, sexual orientation, political, or religious beliefs, it has not undergone ethical review. However, data which could identify students or institutions have been removed, and all participating students have been anonymised.

The interviews were recorded and based on an interview guide that raised questions about what one should know and be able to do and how one should act as a counsellor. For example, inquiries were made about how they wanted to be as a counsellor, what knowledge and competences they had learned are needed, what personal qualities they considered to be important, what challenges they saw in their future profession, and what values they considered to be central to professional practice. The questions were open-ended and follow-up questions were posed to enable clarification and development of arguments. During the telephone interviews, special emphasis was placed not only on waiting for responses but also on checking if they had anything else they wanted to add before the next question was asked.

Each interview took between 45–70 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. It is noteworthy that the telephone interviews generally were not shorter than the others, nor did they provide fewer data. All material was then read through several times; this initial reading being inductive without a theoretical framework. All statements that dealt with knowledge, what to do, approaches, values and ideals, and how to act as a counsellor were marked and coded. In further processing, the focus was on similarities and differences in the statements to capture patterns and themes (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both statements from each individual student and patterns that recurred in the 23 interviews were analysed. In this way, the analysis moved between concrete statements and the material as a whole. The material was finally sorted into various themes that reflect content about professional identity. In this phase, attention was directed towards how students described the tasks of counsellors and how these tasks are performed, their approach and relationship to the individuals being counselled, and the knowledge required for professional practice. Quotes have been selected in the results section to make the themes visible through students' statements. The selection of quotes is in turn based on how well they clarify the various themes and reflect both joint and individual descriptions of the professional identity.

RESULTS

The students describe the importance of being a skilled conversation leader who is empathetic, neutral, and open-minded in assisting individuals to navigate their career choices. This was a distinctive feature of their professional identity which will be discussed in the following six sections. The first section addresses what they want to contribute to in their profession, i.e., the aim of counselling. Then, there is a section that deals with the counselling conversation, followed by sections describing approaches and personal resources related to the execution of the counselling conversation. The final section touches upon involuntary tasks that students perceive as impacting the conversation and that are associated with ambiguities regarding the boundaries of the profession.

In this study, there are no significant differences in how students at the two universities describe their future professional identity. Any minor differences can be attributed to individuals' varying perceptions.

ASSIST PEOPLE TO MAKE THE “RIGHT” CAREER CHOICES

The students emphasise how they learned during their education that people themselves must make decisions about their career choices, but that at the same time it can be difficult for the individual to see for themselves the opportunities that exist. Therefore, they may need help to orient themselves, and in that process the counsellor acts as a sounding board who assists with thinking about choices or adaptations in life. One student described it as the counsellor contributing to the individual's potential to effectively choose their own path, and that it is also about them contributing through their professional practice to strengthening personal development. The goal is to help people realise for themselves, to embrace the opportunity to get an education and to work with what they want. Here is an additional example of how students describe what it means to be a counsellor:

In general, it feels like this thing about empowerment, that it has been like a cornerstone throughout the education. Constantly trying to work on strengthening the individual and building them up from the outside, because I think this thing with motivation is difficult. It's never me or you or anyone else who can motivate another person, it has to come from them. But then I will become a tool for them to find this motivation, so you have to twist and turn (IP9).

The meeting with the counsellor is presented as the entrance to an introspective process which, under the counsellor's guidance, should contribute to making visible to the person the opportunities being offered and what they themselves want to do with their lives. This also contains an implicit expectation that the help offered by counsellors contributes to individuals ending up “right” in their choices.

According to the students, being a counsellor also means being able to lead conversations. They were taught that the counselling conversation permeates professional practice and is the tool that should contribute to them being able to provide help for self-help. Students therefore described the various methods of leading and managing linguistic interaction with people of different ages as key knowledge for their professional practice and said that they had learned the basics of conversational methodology during their education.

The most important thing I gained from my education is the conversation methodology that we had to work with during the placement and I have found that to be very, very important. The actual meeting with people and how to do counselling, I think is actually the absolutely most important part that you have to learn during this education to be able to do your job later (IP17).

The students describe how their abilities to talk, listen and interact have been continuously trained during their education. During the theoretical part, they learned different theories and methods of counselling conversations and they had to practise conducting conversations in small groups with their fellow students in preparation for the placement. Through the conversation exercises, they learned to ask questions, conduct conversations, and how, by simple means, to change the direction of a conversation from being about problems to being about solutions.

You have, like, a little toolbox from which you can pick out all sorts of creative methods to get different things out of the conversation. That is probably what is so exciting, that you can try out different methods and possibilities (IP1).

Conversational competence is so central to their professional practice that some students consider how their conversational skills can also be used in other contexts.

After all, we have been given tools so that we can lift the pupil, we can help by talking to them. So, I think it is mostly about pupils with difficulties. That you have the opportunity to maybe help that pupil find tools or whatever it is that is a problem, that piece. And you have a lot of knowledge about this, with group guidance, that maybe in messy classes you can go in and have a little group guidance, yes help with that part (IP5).

The quote can be interpreted to mean that the knowledge of conversational methods they have acquired through their education contributes to their seeing opportunities for assisting in therapeutic or conflict resolution efforts with students. It can also be described as students seeing opportunities to broaden their professional identity into other areas where knowledge of conversation methodology is a resource.

There were also students who described how they noticed during their placement that the counselling conversations are not always carried out in the way they learned at university. The students highlighted the number of conversations that must be conducted combined with the time available as one reason why everything does not happen according to the theoretical models they learned at university. Another reason that was highlighted was that the conversation methods they practised in the classroom do not always come naturally in a conversation with a young pupil and therefore adaptations need to be made.

I've learned that reality is much more complicated than education paints it to be, and by that I don't mean social relationships or the like, but how a conversation goes. How many rules you have to break to get conversations rolling sometimes (IP6).

Several students described this lack of correspondence between theory and practice as initially challenge because during their placement they wanted to find support through the conversation exercises for what they had learned in theory. At the same time, however, there were students who also found a positive side to the experiences. They reflected that they had learnt several ways to be a counsellor based on their own conditions. One student said that there are wrong ways to conduct conversations, but that there are also a lot of ways that are

right. Therefore, she had stopped constantly pushing herself to do everything right according to the theoretical models.

BE EMPATHETIC AND BE A GOOD LISTENER

Another description of what it means to be a counsellor is about the personal qualities and means of expression the students believe are needed in the conversation-leading role. Being empathetic and responsive during the counselling was something that was particularly highlighted as central to their professional identity.

But then this empathy, that you listen in and listen out. Empathy is very important, I think (IP15).

The students also expressed how the ability to listen is central to grasping what is actually being said and gaining an understanding of the person they meet. One student said they learned that a counsellor has a small mouth but big ears. Several students said the ability to listen is therefore something they needed to practise during their education.

And it's the conversation that interests me. It is there somewhere that we lay the foundation for what we will be dealing with. And it has probably also made me a better listener. It's something I developed more than I could before, to listen more than I speak. I guess I've had more of the other ability in the past. So, I feel that a lot has happened (IP14).

The above quote is an example of how the students describe being trained to develop their personal resources to lead conversations attentively. The ability to listen has therefore increasingly been incorporated into the students' way of leading conversations and is now present more naturally than before they started their studies. Some students stated that they had changed their way of interacting in conversations, even in private contexts, and now listened more than they talked, which can be interpreted as the professional and personal identity to some extent beginning to merge as a result of the training they received during their education.

There were also several other qualities the students highlighted as desirable for a counsellor. Among other things, the importance of coming across as kind, confidence-inspiring, understanding, happy and inspiring was mentioned.

I want to be a welcoming person that you have confidence in and a person that you feel you can trust and also get support through and be able to develop through in some way (IP14).

The students' statements about how they want to be as a counsellor can be understood from the perspective that the profession is aimed at providing help through conversational interaction. Being a person who is perceived as empathetic, understanding, confidence-inspiring and welcoming increases the likelihood that people will want to use their services. Their resource for inviting pupils and clients into conversation and getting them to open up about their thoughts and dreams is thus, to some extent, using yourself as a welcoming person to create trust. Social abilities related to communication, hospitality and humanity then appear to be central to the professional identity.

ALWAYS REMAIN NEUTRAL

There are also descriptions of professional identity that deal with the importance of being neutral to be able to facilitate counselling most effectively. The students describe how they were trained to reserve their own thoughts and feelings about the other person during the counselling conversation. As a counsellor, you should not contribute your own opinions or suggestions.

If someone asks what I think, I ask them what they think and proceed more from them or what they say (IP18).

In the students' statements, the neutral approach appears as a central ideal of professional identity, which is based on a conception that the person being counselled already has the

answer within, but it needs to be drawn out of them. The individual's own thoughts and ideas must therefore be protected from external influence in various forms. The counsellor's own opinions and values must not constitute a disturbance. However, there are examples in the interviews of how both parties can experience this ideal as difficult to achieve.

Be neutral all the time, and I know that some pupils get so angry, because they just want you to say what you think. I never say what I think because I want them to figure it out for themselves. And it's very difficult because you know sometimes, that oh, how you think that that education would have been suitable or something like that. But to always be neutral and sort of stop, no, no, no. [...] You have your norms, just put them aside because they kind of don't belong here (IP12).

This quote makes visible how the student in her counselling met the pupil's expectations that she should be able to provide good advice. What also emerges is how the neutral approach that the students have learned can be difficult to manage because it requires them to constantly restrain their own thoughts. There are also examples of students expressing doubts about being neutral in all situations and perhaps especially when meeting young people. One student said that it works when they sit and practise conversation methodology at the university, but that 15–16-year-olds who may be meeting a counsellor for the first time and who want tips and advice can find this approach foreign.

At the same time, it emerged that there were also students who found the neutral approach ideal a source of security in certain situations, especially when external parties or employers want help from counsellors with targeted career choices or marketing:

I know that when I worked in adult education, the public employment agency tried to push [the view] that we actually need people who go into health and social care. But no, that is not our role and it felt very nice. We don't work for something that determines what we have to say to people, but you are neutral and that is very important (IP23).

The quote show how other people's expectations of what a counsellor should contribute can clash with what the students have learned about what it means to be a counsellor. The ideal of a neutral approach works in these situations as an important principle to which they can refer, and which also contributes to justifying the key focus on the individual's own free will. The statements can be interpreted to mean that the neutral approach is not only about protecting the person seeking counselling from the influence that may come from the counsellor. The person being counselled must also be protected from external influences from other parties in the environment. Overall, the professional identity expressed in the statements seems to be based, among other things, on a strong belief about the importance of optimising opportunities for the individual to make free choices.

HAVE AN OPEN-MINDED AND NORM-CRITICAL APPROACH

The students also mentioned in the interviews how their education contributed to making them more aware of how people's various conditions are affected by different social structures and norms in society. They have also become more aware of how their own norms and values affect the way they look at and treat other people.

And you somehow get, you become a little humbler as a person. You really understand that there are more components. That there is a larger background, and everyone has such different paths. And something that I really think has left a mark on me in this education, it's to crush a lot of prejudices that I may not have been aware of. I consider myself quite broad-minded, but I have definitely opened up more during this education and really gained a greater understanding (IP17).

This increased awareness is something the students describe they carry with them into the counselling conversations and is used to rein in their own preconceptions about the person they meet. Professional identity also involves having an open and curious mind and assuming that things can be the opposite of what you think:

To never forget this, that I should sit and think I know without always double-checking. That I shouldn't be too quick to draw conclusions about people I talk to. That one should always ask a few extra questions to get a picture of their perceptions (IP 16).

This open-minded and norm-critical approach are presented as an important foundation for not taking it for granted that certain vocations suit men, for example, precisely because they are male dominated or vice versa. One student explained that it can also be about not assuming that people from other cultures should behave or think in a certain way.

The open-minded and norm-critical approach is also presented as an important foundation for assisting those being guided to see outside their own frameworks to open up new options that are not initially visible. The students describe it as helping to broaden the perspectives of those being guided. If the neutral approach described earlier constitutes a resource for reducing external influence, the open-minded and norm-critical approach instead seems to constitute a resource for enabling the dissolution of various potentially inhibiting structures that surround individuals.

That through the education we have almost been trained, and I don't mean that it has to be the teachers, but that it has become so, that we want to sort of break these norms and make them understand, don't you see why you choose this? But at the same time, you have to be able to do what you are interested in as well. It doesn't have to be wrong. Then we want to broaden the perspectives and show opportunities and so on. But at the same time, you have to support the pupils in what they want too. So, it sometimes feels like a difficulty that you almost have to work the other way around (IP9).

This quote provides examples of how the neutral and the norm-critical approach are to some extent described as opposites of each other, and it can be challenging to balance them. On the one hand, the student describes the importance of not offering advice or influence to respect the principle of free choice, and on the other hand, the importance of making the person aware of other possibilities that may go beyond what is given. The student describes deciding when a person should be challenged and when they should be affirmed as a balancing act which is about when to try to influence and when to not do so.

GUARD PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Another aspect of the counsellor's professional identity addressed in the interviews is that their knowledge of and willingness to carry out counselling conversations do not always get the space in the practical activities that the students expected. The students describe how in the future they need to deal with the gap they experience between what they have learned should be included in their assignments and what counsellors actually do in many workplaces. What is especially raised in the interviews is that the profession involves much administration, which the students were not prepared for.

For me, the education gave me the picture that it would involve lots of conversations, conversations, conversations all the time. But then, now that I've worked as a counsellor for a few years, I notice that the conversations with the pupils are sort of the smallest part. It has mostly been administrative (IP12).

The students describe common administrative tasks as, for example, arranging working experience placements, changing courses, checking study plans, helping with individual choices, assisting with scheduling, and dealing with upper secondary school applications or other types of education applications. Several student's express disappointment that the conversations in many workplaces tend to make up a relatively small part of the tasks compared to the administrative tasks.

What I see many times around this is that there are a lot of administrative things that maybe take a lot of time away from what I would really like to do. And that's what I feel I'm prepared for, what I want to practise [...] It's like an administrative

role that has to be this and that, but the conversation itself and what really changes the individuals, there's not much time for that (IP14).

Here is an example of how the students describe the relationship between the conversations they want to engage in and administrative tasks that are experienced as hindering burdens. But what is also expressed is that the imposed administrative tasks contribute to the loss of something important in their professional identity related to developing people. There is a conception among students that individuals who are not given enough counselling are not given the same opportunities for self-realisation or for finding the education and work they are best suited for. A conception that counsellors guarantee the possibility of better choices for the individual is implicit in this type of statement.

Another aspect of the gap that the students describe between theory and practice is that they have experienced ignorance among other professional groups about what they should be doing and can assist with.

That other professional groups at the schools, they don't really know what a counsellor does. It's quite sad when you don't know what you're hiring (IP6).

This ignorance among other professional groups is also presented as a contributing factor to counsellors needing to spend time on administration instead of conversation and contributes to expectations that they should assist with various tasks within the workplace that are not assigned to a specific staff member. The students compared their role to that of a teacher — everyone knows what a teacher does but counselling is somewhat less well understood and therefore harder to define for other professional groups. Something they took with them from their placements is therefore that it is important to stand up for one's profession and be clear with a prospective employer about what should reasonably be included in their responsibilities.

Because it can happen that you have to fight a little for things you shouldn't do, for example, or should do, usually shouldn't do. That you should be used for what you are educated for and nothing else. Counsellors have existed for a long time, but how they have been used has looked very different. So, it's unfortunately a bit of your own responsibility, how you present yourself and what should be included in the tasks and how clear you are, so that's an important part (IP4).

In other words, the experience that the students took with them is that what counsellors actually fill their working hours with can look very different from what they should be doing and that they need to guard their professional boundaries.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study has been to analyse how Swedish students in their last semester of a university career counsellor programme describe their future professional identity based on experiences from their education and participating in career counselling activities in the workplace. The results show how students describe how their mission is to help people make their own free choices and to minimise things that could constitute external influence. The strong loyalty to the person being counselled, the desire to always behave neutrally as well as to pay attention to and counteract one's own and societal norms and structures can be understood as important parts of the professional identity that the students want to represent. The counselling conversation should enable this assignment and is described as a significant resource in professional practice. During their studies, the students were trained in various conversational methods and learned how to confidently assist individuals in their exploration of their own competencies, interests and future goals. The students described that they developed their personal means of expression and ways of being to facilitate the conversational interaction with the counselled persons, which indicates they understand that professional identity as a counsellor presupposes specific social and communicative abilities.

In the students' statements, it seems relatively obvious that they feel they can contribute to helping individuals with better career choices through the counselling theories and methods they learned in their education. By listening, understanding, and asking questions, the counsellor optimises the individual's career choices. That the students will be able to assist individuals

make better choices when the counselling is solely based on the individual's interests and omits a societal perspective seems obvious in the statements.

What is it then that contributes to the students expressing such a significant importance on individual choice when asked about what would define their future professional practice? Previous studies show that the focus on individuals is not unique to Swedish students. Neary (2014) as well as Allan and Moffett (2016) describe in their studies from a British educational context how ethical standards that emphasise a client focus above all else contribute to defining students' identity and self-esteem as counsellors. As demonstrated by Andreassen et al. (2019), some other Nordic education programmes for counsellors also have a strong emphasis on individual counselling at the expense of competencies for interventions at the organisational and societal levels. Hooley et al. (2018) argue that individualised counselling is part of a neoliberal rationality of lifelong learning and employability that aims to shape active and responsible individuals who will contribute to Europe's future. The counsellor then supports the individual in balancing the risks and benefits of various career choices, but the choice always belongs to the individual. The focus on the individual's interests contributes to the individual's career choices being solely dependent on their own ability to shape their future based on prevailing societal conditions. Problems and power relations in society then risk being overlooked. Bengtsson (2014) remarks that the methods and theories used in the counselling conversations and taught in the education itself contribute to individualised counselling. The methods are aimed at learning about oneself based on a reflection on one's own abilities, experiences, goals and expectations, which aims to make the individual co-responsible and involved in planning their own future. To break the trend, new tools are therefore needed to address complex issues linked to social inequality. As highlighted by Højdal (2020), it is not sufficient to simply raise awareness among individuals about contextual influencing factors such as gender and ethnicity for the individual to have more influence over their career choices.

What also emerged from the study is how the formation of a professional identity is an ongoing process. The students said that, through the theoretical part of their education, they had acquired a special combination of knowledge, abilities and approaches they perceived the professional culture requires and which they described in a coherent manner. The theoretical part of their education can therefore be said to offer the students a collective view of the counsellor's professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). It has also been shown that the students' learning was affected and challenged by their participation in the practical activities, which indicates that the models taught in education do not always match what the counsellor ends up doing in practice. For example, the results show that the students noticed that counsellors do not conduct counselling conversations according to the methods and theories they learned during their education. They also experienced themselves that the conversation models they learned do not always work in the real setting with a pupil. It also emerged that there were students who question and want to balance out the expectation and the ideal of always being neutral in relation to the counselled. In accordance with the study's theoretical framework, the prevailing practice in the placement environments and the experiences the students gain through the practical training contribute new perspectives on professional practice (cf. Lamote & Engels, 2010). The students' experiences of a lack of correspondence between theory and practice is not unique, and research shows that it is common in professional education. Colley et al. (2003, p. 489) suggest that "students must orient themselves to both the idealised and the realised way of being for the one mitigates the other". In this study, it can be understood that the theoretical education's idealised image of a counsellor provides a framework that influences both the students' approach to and view of the one being counselled, as well as theories and methods for individualised counselling. The results also indicate that the realised practice had a dampening effect that allowed the students to adapt their professional identity to their own conditions and ambitions. It can also be said that the realised practice offers students a new agency when they see that they do not have to follow to a tee the models and methods they learned in theory (cf. Eteläpelto et al., 2014).

Theoretical education's idealised image of professional identity was challenged by the structural conditions that prevail within the school system. Eteläpelto et al. (2014) stresses that both socio-cultural and material conditions can provide necessary resources but also act as limitations in the formation of a professional identity. In this study, the students described how their future professional practice, what should be included in their tasks, was influenced

by other professional groups' ideas about and expectations of what a counsellor is and does. The students learned that counsellors often perform administrative tasks that are not always related to the counselling practice, which affected their image of what counsellors actually do. At the same time, the students' attention to the fact that professional practice entails much administration cannot be said to be unique for counsellors. Castillo & Ivarsson Westerberg (2019) show that since the beginning of the 1990s, administrative work has increased in all modern organisations and that administration therefore occupies a large part of the working time of many professional groups. They attribute the increased administration to governance and demands made by the state on, for example, the school system.

As stated in the introduction of this article, previous research and investigations show that there are significant differences in how counselling is offered and conducted as well as in the quality of offerings in the Swedish's schools (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). Based on what emerged from the study's results, one way to understand the differences is that local working conditions can constitute obstacles that prevent continuous professional learning and thus the development of one's own practice (cf. Eteläpelto et al., 2014). Unlike some other professional groups there are few institutional mechanisms in the workplace that contribute to maintaining the collective professional identity that takes shape during education. Working conditions depend on the workplace, and counsellors often work alone, having to devise work routines for themselves. How the professional identity of the individual counsellor and thereby practice is shaped is therefore dependent on personal interests, aspirations, goals, and the individual's ability to negotiate the content of their practice with managers and colleagues. Students thus highlighted the need to guard the boundaries of their professional responsibilities, and to recognise opportunities to use their conversational skills in other contexts as well.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study are based on qualitative interviews with 23 students from two universities, conducted during their final semester of education. Therefore, the findings rely on a relatively small number of participants who completed their education in a specific context, namely Swedish education, with its unique characteristics. It is thus challenging to draw broad conclusions about students' learning of their professional identity as a counsellor. Factors such as the students' age and any previous study and work experiences may have also influenced their descriptions. Further studies that involve larger numbers of students and that compare data between countries could contribute to more comprehensive knowledge.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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