



Immeasurability loss? An analysis of the impacts of accountability measures on counselling within VET

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Abstract

Comparative measures of learning outcomes and professional actions are set out to indicate accountability of VET. Individualisation and fragmentation of education emphasise counselling of students as support for their learning. The purpose of the article is to identify how counsellor and teacher practitioners perceive opportunities and challenges in merging their pedagogical and fundamental conventions of their work with structures and frameworks of accountability constituting their practice. Theoretically the study is influenced by socio-cultural perspectives. The analysis follows an abductive approach, reporting on the results from ethnographic observations of guidance counselling (N=29) within VET and subsequent interviews (N=12). We ask how the tension between the immeasurable and measurable contextualises within counselling, and how counselling is construed by counsellors and teachers. The results suggest adherence to quality measures in VET exchanged processes of human interactions and agreements with assumptions of outcomes. The effort of reaching the measures led to failure in achieving the purpose of what the targets are meant to underscore, portraying a disillusion of control. Accountability addressed a critical point concerning responsibility and evoked professional ethical dilemmas for the practitioners. Certain categorised actions of counselling processes were made externally visible by documentation but depleted counselling as learning processes inwards.

Keywords: vocational education and training, guidance, object-informed counselling, counselling-process, professional responsibility, competence, managerialism



Introduction

A central aim of managerialist reforms of public sector administration has been to give more institutional autonomy in exchange for measurable evidence of quality (Savoie, 1995). These measures are set out to indicate effective use of financial resources, indicating accountability of public organisations, like education (Biesta, 2010). Looking at vocational education and training (VET)¹ through the lens of Hood's production mode (Hood & Peters, 2004), two parallel trends can be observed. The first involves approaches of competency-based training (CBT), where production focuses on optimising certain skills, categorised as competence, which outcomes are readily observable and therefore measurable (Allais, 2014, 2017; Billett, 2014b; Raggatt & Williams, 1999). Due to a global shift toward qualifications framework, CBT is today operating in ways that are interconnected to control-systems generating internationally comparative financial incentives (Allais, 2014, 2017). The second trend is the influence of managerialism on educational interpersonal work. That is, management by measuring outcomes of work, coined as 'New Public Management' (NPM) by Hood (1995). NPM switches focus from work-processes and content to introduction of measures of work, and the fulfilment of measured criteria (Ball, 2017; Hood & Peters, 2004).

In parallel with reforms toward managerialist governing, individualisation of learning has expanded rapidly (Biesta, 2010), and educational guidance counselling (later counselling) is seen as an important support for students individual learning and development (Mikkonen et al., 2017; Vehviläinen, 2001, 2014). Within counselling of VET students, impacts of CBT and NPM have become apparent (Rosenblad et al., 2021) and pedagogical concepts are introduced to portray the growing post-reform field of counselling. Yet, little research has looked at counselling within VET as support for learning. The purpose of the article is to identify how counsellor and teacher practitioners perceive opportunities and challenges in merging their pedagogical and fundamental conventions of their work with structures and frameworks of accountability constituting their practice.

Background: VET reform and managerialist implications on interpersonal work VET reforms implemented in Finland during the past decade (about 2008–2019) have aimed at improved levels of skills, employability, educational productivity, financial efficiency and effectiveness (see Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2015; Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture [FMEC], 2017b, 2020). Against the curriculum-based VET introduced in the early 1990s a contrast toward individualised CBT and qualification requirements (QRs) (FMEC, 2017a) occurred as sharp and prominent (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2013; Kontio et al., 2019). The effort to commit individual progress to the framework of QRs is materialised within the 'personal competence development plan' (PCDP) compulsory for all students in VET (FMEC, 2018). Accordingly, constraints of the

new VET have become a question of individual counselling of the students. By terms of support for self-efficacy and self-governing (Nokelainen et al., 2018), accrediting of prior knowledge (Andersson & Fejes, 2011), and 'meeting of the students needs' (FMEC, 2017b) by counselling have been widely introduced in VET (EDUFI, 2020; cf. Onnismaa & Pasanen, 2020). Students' counselling has evolved into a distinct area and, as a responsibility stretching beyond the immediate system of VET, toward compulsory education, career services, unemployment agencies, and the labour market (EDUFI, 2021).

Biesta (2010) argues that the categorisation of outcomes of educational work as 'ends of professional action' has led to certain measures of actions becoming comprehended as evidence of effective intervention. In complex systems, measures are indeed to some extent important indicators of development or change, but an overfocus leads to problems, fading out fundamental educational aspects beyond measures of 'desirable actions.' Also, he argues that an over-rationalised measuring outdated democratic discussions about 'what education is for,' and what 'good education is' as unnecessary, because concerns about values informing what we measure cannot be derived from what is measured (Biesta, 2010; Schaffar, 2021). Essential parts of educational work are merely not separable from sensibility, reflection, and situational judgement. If the rational and measurable begin to constitute overall means of interpersonal work, here specifically educational work, they obscure what is valuable to do under situational contexts and blurred circumstances (Bornemark, 2018a, 2018b; Schön, 1983; Tyson, 2017).

Prior research on counselling within VET

The meaning of counselling is normally viewed as a helpful tool for the individual in difficult situations and to support proceeding through fragmented institutional systems. Prior research has shown that counselling sometimes is added as individually applied solution for problems that are structural to their nature (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Brunila et al., 2020; Onnismaa & Pasanen, 2020; Peavy & Auvinen, 2002). For instance, Brunila et al. (2020) focused on projects directed to young people 'at risk.' They identified counselling taking place as behavioural governance, forming the 'individual self' becoming the smith of own successes or failures, such as employability, accepting own poverty or the oppression of others, despite the fact that unemployment, fatigue or exclusion remains a structural problem of labour, society, and policy (see also Brunila, 2013; Brunila & Lundahl, 2020; Järvinen, 2020; Masoud et al., 2020). The expansion of counselling can also be explained by promises of modern individualism, including phenomena such as self-development within a marketised self-fulfilment project. Educational counselling, however, is mainly expanding due to envisioned affordances in systems where individuals do not reach desired levels of success without individual support and advice (Vehviläinen, 2014, p. 34f).

Vuorinen and Virolainen (2017) emphasise that attempts to develop counselling systems within VET should recognise the disjointedness and long-term effects of counselling. Mikkonen et al. (2017) show that students' responsibility of requesting guidance might be crucial for how learning at the boundaries of workplaces and VET turn out. As a result, courage in taking initiative and commitment to guidance processes may bear consequences for development of expertise in a longer perspective. Workplaces are committed to different requirements and pressure of production, which form guidance, and the results of learning, in unpredictable ways (Mikkonen et al., 2017). Further, Billett (2014a) has described the complexity of how subjective learning arise and develop at workplaces, and the opportunities or challenges of knowledge transfer to new situations through guided processes of everyday work activities and intertwined interactions within VET. Billett (2006, 2009, 2018), Jørgensen (2008, 2015), and Bohlinger et al. (2015) have considered guidance as bridging school-based and work-based arenas, showing their diverse learning cultures, shedding light on the uncertainty of individual agency depending on occasional aspects where vocational 'career' seldom was a matter of choice. Yet, counselling in terms of career-guidance yields support of instrumentalities like career skills and career 'competencies' [sic!] that extensively have been introduced to VET (e.g. Bårdsdatter Bakke, 2021; Hooley & Rice, 2019; Hooley et al., 2013; Magee et al., 2021; Moreno da Fonseca, 2015; Okolie et al., 2020).

Research on counselling has often emanated from academic disciplines through theories and methods legitimate for the disciplines in question, which is the reason for its fragmented nature (see Vuorinen & Sampson, 2002). There are cross-disciplinary exceptions indeed (as Onnismaa et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2004). Accordingly, research focusing on (un)employment and transitions from VET to employment (e.g., Brunila & Lundahl, 2020) have questioned if counselling can be considered as support for emancipation or should just be seen as a gearwheel in the mechanism of power structures. Most likely, it is both (see Onnismaa & Pasanen, 2020; Vehviläinen, 2001, 2014).

Object-informed counselling processes

Vehviläinen (2014) considers counselling interactions as taking a stance from sociocultural objects of focus, moving towards their reaching or change. When objects are defined and agreed upon through collaborative and dialogical interactions, they can support the coordination and structuring of counselling processes. As a pedagogical process, subjective and social motives are connected to the objects of focus, and therefore encourages counselees' taking responsibility for their own actions. That responsibility materialises as a joint effort in connecting to the world. In a narrower sense, the core process of counselling can be shaped as serving a meaningful purpose to the counselees' own life, supporting learning and development of agency. This leads to possible redefinition of objects and enable

the definition of new ones over time (Eteläpelto & Paloniemi, 2013; Vehviläinen, 2001). Within Finnish VET, counselling is committed to roles of study coordinating and, as a 'responsible co-author' of students (individualised) 'competence development.' These kinds of roles are extended over multiple intertwined activity systems (Engeström, 2014), like work-based and school-based environments (Jørgensen, 2008). The objects are shifting between short- and longer-term focus within counselling processes, where they function as intellectual and communicative artefacts (Säljö, 2014). Objects can, thus, be considered meaningful for the planning and proceeding of the counselling – and learning – process, and effective tools for the institution employing counselling. Such considerations of object can also connect the process to social and subjective meaning from where agentic actions emerge (Billett & Pavlova, 2005) for both the counselee and the counsellor. Vehviläinen has identified counselling actions taking their stance from situationally followed lines of action, that is orientations, such as support, problem-solving, and exploration of experiences. These can further be distinguished within proactive and reactive methods that can support the structuring of the counselling seen as process driven (Vehviläinen, 2014). These methods portray process-driven counselling at the boundaries of systems, which shifting objects are 'boundary objects', and the collaborative processes, through which the objects are found, as boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). A fundamentally different way of comprehending counselling would be as merely a coaching tool with aims to reach specific instrumentalities, following given schemes, and via fixed conditions be assumed as an efficient and effective production-driven procedure rather than a process (Vehviläinen, 2014, p. 111ff).

The diverging expectations from the systems connected to counselling generate different contradictions (Engeström, 2001, 2014). There are discrepancies between setting fixed outcomes of CBT (Allais, 2014; Wheelahan, 2009, 2015) and to regard these as constituents of learning processes. There is a contradiction emerging between the measures of action as quality and the comprehension of innovative work processes (Ball, 2017), visible as, e.g., paradoxes of NPM (Hood & Peters, 2004). Vehviläinen (2014) points out that any contradictions of the counselling process needs to be kept visible if the supervisor is to remain at the service of the counselee's learning.

From this perspective, to be at the service of the counselee's learning, counselling as pedagogical practice within VET is not much researched. Moving toward individualisation, accountability and managerialist governing of both education and professional work we explore the compatibility of the above notion of counselling with the global trend in VET. For us, this becomes a question of (im)measurability.

To review the tension between the immeasurable and measurable dispositions, we ask:

1. How is the tension between the immeasurable and the targets of measurement contextualised in counselling?
2. How do counsellors and teachers construe counselling?

Method

The study is part of a design-based research (DBR) project (Rosenblad et al., 2020). The DBR (see also Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) began (2018) through identifying needs of research-based knowledge concerning counselling within VET. Out of a total of 96 VET schools in Finland, two organisations participated in the DBR. After initial information sessions, twelve (N=12) counsellor and teacher practitioners consented to participate in the study; four and eight from each school, respectively. The criteria for participation included defined responsibilities in counselling committed to responsibilities within students' 'personal competence development plan' (PCDP) which is implemented in Finnish VET due to the reform toward CBT (FMEEC, 2018).

The consent was continuously monitored throughout the process to ensure that participation was truly voluntary. That is, research participants' right to give informed consent, withdraw consent, or continue consent. This concerns all the persons; practitioners and students observed and/or interviewed.

The participants were informed about how data anonymisation and data storage would be managed, and about methods, reporting and publishing. At the meetings held at the beginning and end of each DBR cycle, preliminary results were fed back in anonymised form along with discussions to support the participating organisations. No other incentives were used. Avoidance of any harm was a priority in the research. The study did not involve elements that require an ethics review in Finland (i.e., research involving intervention in the physical integrity of research participants; deviation from informed consent; research involving participants under the age of fifteen being studied without parental consent; exposure to exceptionally strong stimuli; risk of causing long-term mental harm beyond that encountered in normal life; or security risk) (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, 2019).

The analysis process unfolds as an abductive approach put forward by Timmermans and Tavory (2012). The method is argued as suitable where sufficient experiences of the observed practice and knowledge of theories are used to produce new insights based on unexpected empirical findings. The method involves a moving of focus back and forth between existing theories and the produced data. Existing theories are used to understand observations, and new theory can

be constructed where existing theories cannot fully explain an observation. Accordingly, the existing theories are strengthened and the gap between theory and empirical evidence decreases (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Research-design and data

Within cycles of DBR, two complementary datasets were produced by Niklas Rosenblad during summer and winter 2019–2020. The first dataset (D1) was based on ethnographic observations (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 35–54) and the second (D2) on semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

The first dataset (D1) was produced during summer and autumn 2019. This consisted of 29 participatory observations of counselling opportunities including discussions and planning in which counsellors, teachers and students participated to set up or update the students' PCDPs. The data (D1) comprise 78 pages of transcribed notes. The observed counselling sessions lasted about one hour each. Sometimes, in addition to a student and the responsible counsellor, a VET teacher or special education teacher also participated. Two group counselling sessions of three- or four-hours' duration were also observed. In these, a counsellor, a teacher, and a special education teacher participated together with a group of 20–30 students. Occasionally Rosenblad also participated in informal discussions, lunch or coffee breaks with the informants and her/his colleagues. The researcher's focus during the observations was on the constitution and collaborative emergence of counselling, and which kind of themes were raised in the counselling sessions, by whom, and what kind of further agreement were made.

Due to a thematic analysis approach, looking for relationship between object-informed counselling and the data D1, eight themes were identified. These originated from the data as either directly, or as informed by, e.g., Vehviläinen (2014), Andersson and Fejes (2011), and Allais (2017). The themes were, Autonomy and wishes about future, Counselling culture, Counselling process, Interaction and collaboration, Stigma and personality, Psychosocial support, Structure and qualification frameworks, and Prior knowledge and earning of competence. As a following stage of the analysis, semi-structured interview questions were construed based on the themes. The interviews (N=12) were conducted during winter 2019–2020 and lasted about one hour each. During the interviews, the interviewees were first asked to describe a typical workday during the past six month. Second, they were asked to explore meanings within the identified themes from D1. Lastly, the participants were asked what they perceive as 'good' counselling, and whether such can be provided in their every-day work and to elaborate in cases of negative or positive answer. The interview data (D2) consisted of 120 pages of text transcribed from voice recordings. The Atlas.ti software was used to aid the thematic analysis process.

In finalising the analysis process, the data (D1 and D2) were handled as an entity. Thirty-one themes emanated from the data either directly through the conceptual model of object-informed counselling (i.e., Vehviläinen, 2014) or as abductively informed by our readings of Biesta (2010), Ball (2017) and Wheelahan (2009, 2015). In the following analysis process, the themes were explored by returning to the data, analysing the overlap between themes, their relations to each other, patterns found in these relations, and their resonance in the theories. Examples of the most representative themes are, Empathy, understanding and agreements (41 quotes); Structure of PCDP (34); and Mechanic performance (work) (26); PCDP as documented process (16). The themes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Abstracted themes, number of themes (n) within the abstracted themes, and themes coded in the data (D1 and D2).

| Abstracted theme | Themes (n) | Theme |
|--|------------|---|
| i. Instrumental control & quality assurance | 7 | Comparative skills; Competency-based; Detail measure and control; Instrumental (learning outcome); PCDP as documented progress; Quality (-assurance, data production); Tools & Instruments. |
| ii. Targets of measurement & expectations of causality | 9 | Accredited knowledge and Assessment; Administration, Measure and data production; All the rest is just 'counselling?'; Career as 'chain of choices'; Categorised work-duties; Information as duty of counselling (one way comm.); Information management system ² ; Mechanic performance (work); Structures of PCDP. |
| iii. Immeasurable means | 15 | Contradiction and distortion; Counselling as life management; Counselling in the moment!; Counselling carries and mirror processes; Despair; 'The' IMS ² model of counselling; Drop out; Emotions, motivation and meaning (learner); Empathy, understanding and agreements; From experiences to knowing; Professional team; Quality (in practice); Sensuality, judgement, 'values about good counselling'; Subject to collective and back; Subjective needs (genuine). |
| Totals (n) | 31 | |

The analysis was followed by a process in which we abstracted the themes. Here, it became increasingly clear that the tension between immeasurable and the measurable was mediated through the production mode (Hood, 1995; Hood & Peters, 2004) by learning outcomes, more precisely between processes enabling learning outcomes on one hand, and across operations within interpersonal work processes and measures of its actions on the other. This process resulted in the recognition of three abstracted themes: (i) Instrumental control and quality assurance, (ii) Targets of measurement and expectations of causality, and (iii) Immeasurable means. The third abstracted theme emerged from and within the first

and the second. We found the third abstraction escaping systematic actions of sorting, reminding of latent tendencies. The Immeasurable (iii) seems therefore to go underneath the other abstractions (i and ii), sometimes questioning their constitution. Although the Immeasurable (iii) is comprehensively represented throughout the data (see Tables 1 and 2), attempts to thematise their emergence occasionally tend to make expression of them disappear.

To construe an adequate level of consensus of the key observations, we discussed at some length five interview transcriptions that were identified as particularly interesting, fruitful, or troublesome. This procedure worked to validate interpretations and our agreement on the main findings. We provide excerpts from the data to illustrate the results. In these excerpts we have used the following abbreviations: cut-off word<; emphasised word; removed part inside quote [...]; and [contextual/situational belonging].

The frequencies of coded themes within the abstracted themes and the data (D1/D2) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Absolute frequency of quotations emerging throughout the data (D1/D2). Abbreviations are Gr=Groundedness of themes (number of quotations coded by a theme) and GS=Number of themes in the abstracted themes (i/ii/iii).

| | D1 Gr=88 | D2 Gr=175 | Totals |
|---|-------------|--------------|--------|
| i: Instrumental control & quality assurance Gr=47; GS=7 | 27 | 20 | 47 |
| ii: Objects of measurement & expectations of causality Gr=94; GS=9 | 28 | 66 | 94 |
| iii: Immeasurable means Gr=134; GS=15 | 38 | 96 | 134 |
| Totals | 93 | 182 | 275 |

Results

Control and quality assurance of personal competence development and qualification

Let us begin with setting the scene using an excerpt from the researchers' field-notes:

About twenty students, a counsellor, a teacher, and me (Researcher) are gathered together in a room. The topic is the students PCDPs and qualification, within which some individual choices of units can be made. How these units are selected in the actual administration system is now demonstrated. Emerging from what is visualised on the white board: the qualification requirements delivered with five initial

words: 'This is your Holy Grail! If you want to seek accrediting of a qualification unit or a moment in such unit, the normal proceeding concerning changes in your PCDP is the following: [...]' (Observation 28)

The vocation-specific qualification requirement (QR) is setting conditions for counselling (via the PCDP) by its stated learning outcomes. As is shown in the data extract, these targets constitute evaluation and accreditation processes of prior knowledge (see Andersson & Fejes, 2011). Together these two are constructing the 'path' of qualifying by pointing at competence yet to be gained. Practitioners perceive this path as limiting possibility for interaction with their students, as described by one counsellor:

Well, it comes from above, these you know, thoughts of that you can control and govern this and that. And if you're not accepting being a subject of this control, and if you don't fill out the forms ... then you [the school] won't get any money. And that kind of picture. But that, I think, it's not enough. It's not it, that gives quality. Certainly, there is another reason why this is strictly controlled and managed. (Interview 5)

It was perceived that the qualification path according to the PCDP as a top-down driven process related to financial incentives and measures rather than showing the condition of VET's quality, or the quality of learning as what they pedagogically consider quality to be about. A counsellor illustrated this as follows:

I've always said that the important thing is to build a good whole for the students, a good path and that. [...] On the other hand it [the PCDP] has gone to this overstated, you know, the control and like this. I don't think that is the solution now. It's a matter of this contact and the human meeting. I cannot emphasise this enough, and why is that so hard to understand! [...] The reports and the forms that we have don't really support building-up of this [PCDP] plan either. [...] And maybe it's all that work, that gets frustrating sometimes. When you know what a huge amount of work there is beyond, while it's maybe expected that the focus is only on those targets [in the PCDPs]. (Interview 5)

We interpreted that the counsellor's faith in 'the good whole [...], a good path and that' were based on a thinking of a process-driven approach, where objects of focus should be jointly identified, and chosen by consensus. Namely, throughout the data, such objects were found. They were related to personal, social, and situational meaning, concerning issues that not seldom were committed to a problem-oriented nature, and associated to life outside VET:

Counsellor: [T]hat is to put pairs of eyes on the students in need of help and guidance. It is so important to sit down and discuss with them, and through these meetings find solutions and a way out [of the problem]. And, to talk to other counsellors and colleagues I think, with the student as person in focus. Maybe this isn't always where you solve the problem, but the absolutely most important thing is to have the time to talk to others. (Interview 9)

Practitioners perceived the 'personal competence development plan' (PCDP) traded approaches of process-driven counselling with mechanical 'structures of

control,' individualising the person to a technologically constituted development. Desirable individual 'needs' (e.g., Brunila & Lundahl, 2020) were perceived as 'pushed to fit' the structures (of PCDP and QR) instead of constituting a holism by jointly found 'ways to go' meaning for the counselee. The structure was comprehended as a strict 'plan-to-proceed' as documented within 'reports and forms' set as instrument forming not only student's technical progress but measuring the achieved results of that model. Here, a construction of understanding was needed to emphasise the meaning of learning and to 'know where we are going' in relation to QRs, because the PCDP was perceived as including neither such meaning nor direction.

Teacher: [T]o get it [tasks/units within QR] transferred to the students with language they can understand, so that they know where we are going... Because, if one is presenting the qualification requirements so< [silences]. [...] We have put down what it looks like in our own profession, with 'a flowchart,' as we try to show [...] and explain this QR kind of thinking. (Interview 6)

The QR fails in pointing at objects informing counselling and learning processes. So, as to suggest objects informing these, the practitioners tried to commit the targets in the QR with individual and social meaning to make them understandable or reasonable. This creates a disparity; 'quality' related to efficiency-measures was considered as 'another reason' whilst quality of a 'genuine' individual path was related to objects of 'something else.' Something that, however, forms holistic learning in terms of a 'good whole' for the student. The practitioners did here to some extent defy the structure of measurement and (neoliberal) 'need' (Brunila & Lundahl, 2020) to meet their students' real need. To do so, they needed to confront a reality beyond the empirically observable one of CBT (affirming Bhaskar, 2008; Billett, 2014b; Schaffar, 2021; Wheelahan, 2009).

Measurement as management and quality of counselling

Actions directed towards measured outcomes emerge as central throughout the data. A teacher with counselling duties stated:

[To VET] has been added a staff of people doing things we were used to take care of [psychosocial support, upbringing]. Now we've been left somewhere in between, without a duty in such a sense. More and more we're expected to just fill in papers and forms, PCDPs, and study administrative systems, everywhere. And you can get blamed for things like 'you haven't filled in'... [the forms that] 'you should have!' Well, how are we supposed to have time for that? Everyone expects everything to be documented here [points at the computer]. But how can one document everything about like 50 students' anxiety there!<. Why can't we any longer just talk and agree upon things? [...] It's when everything becomes so electronic. (Interview 12)

The practitioners reported being responsible for up to 200 students, including administration of their PCDPs. They also reported on a decade of decreased financial support of VET leading to those students documented with 'approximately' similar PCDPs were categorised as having 'similar needs' and therefore

placed in same groups. This idea of ‘right-person-in-right-group’ reminds of notions like ‘social engineering’ (see Hood & Peters, 2004), here with assessable educational outcomes (Schaffar, 2021) and documentation in the foreground. A counsellor said:

I may think the saddest part with this job is that I feel like I’m the student secretary’s extended arm. I feel like [that] because I’ve to work with full pace at the computer. And some days, I don’t even meet any students! (Interview 2)

We asked practitioners expressing similar concerns what consumes their time. Commonly the answers were relating to administrative duties and data-production concerning formations of individualisation. And to ‘do what is required’ for the students so they get their competence credits in time. As the counsellor continued:

That’s sad! Because I think, through those meetings with them [students] is what they really need. And that makes me<. I cannot guide all of them as they would need. It’ll be to always do the ‘most urgent.’ (Interview 2)

Within practitioners’ expressions of ‘good counselling’ they try to see students for who they are, in the genuine meeting with them as human beings. But they also perceive there is too little time for such meetings, since the most pressing problems should always be solved by priority and, at the end, it was merely the latter that could be individually considered.

Counselling is to pay attention to documentation relating their work to considerations of what ‘quality’ is, as to show that they have done what is ‘right’ (which gain resonance in Ball, 2017, p. 57–62). However, some practitioners chose other ways. Here a VET teacher with counselling responsibilities compared what practical knowledge is, in comparison to what it is expected to be:

I work according to my ideals, that’s what I do. [...] It’s the same when I’m assisting childbirth at the hospital [as when confronting my students], first I meet the human and then I write down what I’m supposed to. [...] This computing and digitalised world has taken over so much, which has been criticised, yet we’re going there. [...] Inside me there is so much knowledge concerning my students that I cannot get out anyhow [=write down]. (Interview 4)

Some of the practitioners were also, in quite similar terms, describing their choices of strictly deprioritising the data-production. Due to these expressions, it was mediated that such a focus is inadequate. As a counsellor said:

I try to work near my students, physically indeed, but mentally too. So that the threshold to contact me if needed remains low. [...] This results in that PCDP documentation becoming a growing backlog. Well, I do the planning thing with them [students], but the technical things, to get everything down on paper and to the systems. [...] Usually I do not get that documentation done. (Interview 11)

The system emphasises ‘milestones’ or given actions to be done and documented at a certain time. These seems to blur an object-informed counselling process with

a technologically constructed 'correct' scheme of a desirable progress (Vehviläinen, 2014); a beforehand agreement on 'how to act right:'

The expectations [of counselling] are pretty clear. I think they are! But not then [in practice], [...] If you go according to all the IMS² process schematics and like the 'correct path' it doesn't work. What's so frustrating is one knowing that someone is spending enormous amounts of resources building up processes as tools of 'how to act' that doesn't help us anyway. When it's kind of a real need you don't get any help from those [systems]. [...] It's this whole as well as that every individual is so totally different. For some [students] it's their message that is crucial, and for someone else it's their absence [from school/work]. For some, much absence is quite the normal behaviour [...] You cannot know that. If there's someone who's always been good on the spot and then suddenly fades, just that might be the deciding thing. [...] There is nothing like the right way in general for everyone. [...] If there's something that deviates from the [usual] pattern of behaviour, then you have to intervene. But when the pattern of behaviour for each individual is so unique. (Interview 11)

Sometimes the focus on documentation leads to failure in achieving the desired purpose the targets of measurement are meant to underscore. The practitioners emphasise that what 'should be done' takes much more to understand than what is described as 'right action' and 'the correct path' at a given moment in time and proceeding. When it is 'a real need,' a focus on the process and not on its outcomes was emphasised (confirming Vehviläinen & Löfström, 2016).

A commonly occurring expressions was that counselling is depending on a wholeness that only can be built on situational aspects, understanding of each other's perspectives and motives. That is perceived as framed by a great amount of uncertainty and mutual constant negotiations, which literally faded due to the focus on 'quality' as instrumental action and documentation. Throughout the data, the practitioners were not seldom through resignation mediating how their action cannot be considered as 'causal' or situationally 'fixed' although some situations might generally 'seem the same' they seldom are when taking a closer look.

Actually, it is the technical expectations that I am frustrated over. Not that one has to plan [the PCDP] but that it doesn't function like that. It's expected like something can proceed just in a certain way, and then [in practice] it doesn't. (Interview 8)

Due to counselling concerning students' PCDPs, expectations of a technologically categorisable approach and an expected progress in a certain direction was prominent (see 'production driven' proceeding, Vehviläinen, 2014).

Discussion

The purpose of the article was to shed empirical light on how counsellor and teacher practitioners perceived opportunities and challenges in merging their pedagogical and fundamental conventions of their work with structures and

frameworks constituting their practice. We have analysed how the tension between the immeasurable and targets of measurement was contextualised in counselling and, how counsellors and teachers construe counselling.

Trustworthiness and limitations

To ensure trustworthiness of the research we altogether discussed interpretations and the analysis until a consensus concerning what could be derived from the data was reached. Due to the DBR process, results have been evaluated and revised through dialogue with the practitioners in the two organisations to seek resonance between observation, interpretation of data, and the interpreted context. The limited number of organisations might reflect local institutional cultures within the results. If the study would have been able to include multiple organisations, it could possibly have resulted in more variation or a more nuanced picture.

The aim of the DBR was to contribute to pragmatic development of counselling, concerning the formation and support of students' mandatory 'personal competence development plan' (PCDP). Due to the short time perspectives, we could not comprehensively respond to that expectation since the results suggest structural problems in the manner in which the VET project materialises and is governed. Further research should focus on whether the results – related to the limited scope of this study – merely report on concerns of local character and national reform consequences, or whether they also reflect global concerns.

Measures of quality and accountability within VET counselling

The results suggest (1) adherence to quality measures in VET exchanged processes of human interactions and agreements with assumptions of outcomes. The striving toward reaching the measures led to failure in achieving the purpose of what the targets are meant to underscore, portraying a disillusion of control. (2) Accountability addressed a critical point concerning responsibility and evoked professional ethical dilemmas for some of the counsellors. Certain categorised actions of counselling processes were made externally visible by documentation but depleted counselling as learning processes inwards. We discuss these main points below.

First, as the results show, processes of counselling have been predefined and staked out in manuals and forms in the organisations' administration systems² as to match the structures of PCDPs to the frames of QRs. Technical-managerialist ways of comprehending counselling appear to have accumulated demands of documentation and data production corroborating Stephen Ball's (2017) findings. The results indicate that data production as 'evidence' of quality shows a prominent distinction between applying education to the level of the individual and individualisation, where the latter at least increase the administrative burden (see

Onnismaa & Pasanen, 2020). The results show, that committed to individualisation, management of 'the correct' path stole time from what was considered as forming an individually applied 'good' path. Here, individualisation moved focus away from human meetings, content of learning, confrontation of socio-emotional needs, etc. Rather than a dynamic tool supporting ways in which learning and development were comprehended by the practitioners, the PCDP remained a 'code-based categorising institutional instrument' (Säljö, 2014, p. 235ff). To this point, which we also consider as the main result, a detrimental illusion of control was attached. That is, an illumination of the difference between the immeasurable human consciousness, on which object-informed counselling processes can be based, and the technic-managerial attempts to portray a proceeding that might outward look like such a process. The portrayed proceeding seems influenced by what has been argued as doctrines of socio-technical systems and ideas of production engineering within NPM (see Hood & Peters, 2004). The targets of measurement become the self-strengthening instrument previously 'made' meaningful for the individualised CBT to materialise. Thus, quality assurance has forced a focus on, and a direction toward, the measured outcome, and an information accomplishment of system, which fades out underlying factors enabling the emergence of the desirable outcome (Schaffar, 2021)

Second, due to NPM, attempts to attribute motives of social and individual meaning (e.g. Billett, 2006; Billett & Pavlova, 2005) to objects that can inform the counselling process (Vehviläinen, 2014) have become corrupt in a sense. Our results show that to commit objects of social and individual meaning to 'paths' of qualification, human consciousness accentuated as crucial within the collaborative counselling processes. Conditions for human consciousness to emerge was paradoxically perceived as neglected, forsaken. However, it is reasonable to assume that every counsellor with pedagogically and professionally reflected aims makes assumptions based on their subjective understanding of their counselees' needs, and that a counsellor seeks to support process-driven counselling whenever situationally required, or their professional conviction concerning support of their counselees learning. Nevertheless, instead of supporting meaningful processes-driven learning, 'staying at the service of the counselees' learning' (Vehviläinen, 2014), the production-driven procedure risks turning counselling into a therapeutic gearwheel within a mechanism where students are coached or 'pushed' in desired directions. Meeting their 'created' needs here match requirements of the system rather than that situational awareness of practitioners' human consciousness could be used to shape institutional scenes the other way around. This loops back to the individualisation vs. applying to individual discussion (e.g., Onnismaa & Pasanen, 2020), but also poses new questions. These concern the critique of the 'transition-machinery' from VET to work (see Brunila & Lundahl, 2020). For instance, the multifaceted question about how the project

of 'meeting the needs of students and working life' (rhetoric by FMEC, 2017a, 2017b) may indeed materialise in the future.

To conclude, just as 'behaviourism denied human consciousness and situational accounts' (Billett, 2006) the trend of accountability forces distinctions comprehended as the 'technological model of professional action' (Biesta, 2010, pp. 32–37) where pedagogy and responsibility does not seem to be central. As to elaborate – in prior prescriptive reforms, practitioners, 'right or wrong,' have sought to work around such 'quality' models to such extent they perceived them as not meeting the 'real' students' needs (Billett, 2014b, p. 10ff). The results highlight such attempts, where the practitioners sought own solutions, although these solutions may lead them into trouble pointing at (managerially) irresponsible actions. And in so doing, the managerialist quality paradoxically loops back to the question about what responsibility is (see Biesta, 2010). The results suggest there is a disparity between students' needs met by acting in responsible ways and individualised needs responded to by terms of accountability. Here, some of the practitioners confront ethical dilemmas emerging between questions concerning public expectations of their work and prospects committed to their professional responsibility. Those questions concern the unclear focus and affordances of their practice; the future of VET and their workplace; the wellbeing of their students as humans; and the quality of educational outcomes seen as the culturally formed standard of the vocational professions dubiously gaining resonance in accountability. To be at the service of counselee's learning (Vehviläinen, 2014), 'good' paths were shown as central. Nevertheless, in settings where these paths became restricted to ever-more tightened frames of the production-mode (Hood, 1995), counselling within VET risks becoming a structure within accountability systems, where it might just simultaneously show evidence of quality outward and be depleted inwards.

Endnotes

¹ With VET we mean both basic level vocational institutes and adult education centres on upper secondary level, according to European and National Qualifications Framework.

² Information Management System (IMS), a platform for quality and management where work performance is based on data production, process mapping, manuals, metrics, and instructions.

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