



Educational time-out between a rock and a hard place: Vocational students in search of coherent life narratives

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Abstract

This article analyses students in upper secondary vocational education and training (VET) for retail and office work in Norway who deploy gap year justification in search of an educational time-out. The international literature on gap year, emphasises that this is a way for privileged students of getting ahead in the competition for access to elite universities. Based on qualitative interviews of VET students, the article finds that this perspective is, however, very different from the (un)planned 'gapping' reality of the working-class students of the study. The findings show that the students have worked out neither activities for the gap year nor what they plan to do after their time off. Rather, the findings reveal gapping to be a strategy to postpone essential choices of what and who to become. By examining the ways in which VET students in weakly established vocational trades make meaning of their seemingly open-ended educational journeys, the article explores how their interpretations of the opportunities they face are informed by legitimising individualised gapping discourses.

Keywords: vocational students, gap year, coherent narratives, individualisation, youth



Introduction

The Nordic countries share a number of institutional similarities, yet exhibit significant differences in models of vocational education and training (VET) (Jørgensen, Olsen & Persson Thunqvist, 2018; Jørgensen & Tønder, 2018). However, one common challenge is to provide youth with transparent and attractive vocational and occupational paths. Studies have shown that weakly institutionalised vocational trades which are unable to induct newcomers into the skills, knowledge and dispositional approaches of a trade, and to structure access to certain segments of the labour market, impede students' formation of a clear conception of a career path (Reegård, 2017a).

About two decades ago, Norway expanded its quite well-functioning VET system within industry and crafts to also cover the service sector, which lacks tradition of apprenticeship training. The aim of the article is to investigate how students enrolled in the Sales trade and Office and administration trade in Norwegian upper secondary vocational education legitimate, to themselves and to others, the timing of a so-called 'gap year' as a way of making meaning and constructing a coherent narrative of their ambiguous educational journey. 'Gapping' could be a first step for young people to leave school permanently or temporarily, and for that reasons it is relevant to explore how they are reasoning and justifying this choice.

The significance of de-standardised, prolonged and postponed school-to-work transitions remains among the least contested issues within the field of youth research (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Furlong, Woodman & Wyn, 2011). Walther's (2006) notion of 'yo-yo' transitions – as opposed to linear transitions – captures the messiness of transitions, comprised of the two volatile components of choice and risk. In parallel with school-to-work transition routes becoming increasingly uncertain (Heinz, 2009), it has become more common to take time outs from education. Thus, taking a (pre-university) gap year has become a global phenomenon (Birch & Miller, 2007; Curtis, 2014; Snee, 2014a). The literature suggests gapping as a middle-class response to widening participation in higher education designed to establish new forms of distinction, where the gap year is pursued from a position of relative privilege and helps certain young people maintain their social advantage (Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2005a, 2005b). Common gap year activities include combinations of paid work, volunteering, leisure and, perhaps foremost, overseas travel (Bagnoli, 2009; Heath, 2007). The presumed benefits of a gap year include becoming more employable by acquiring soft skills needed in the modern world of work, increased independence, greater maturity, and enhanced self-awareness (Stehlik, 2010). However, studies find that a person taking a break before or during vocational education is more likely to end up as a 'drop-out'. Disconnecting from formal study might mean that one might never re-connect (Stehlik, 2010; Vogt, 2018). Evidence shows that people who commence their

studies before the age of 25 are twice as likely to complete a degree compared to those who wait (Statistics Norway, 2015).

This study implies that working-class students' activities differ from what has been depicted of middle-class youth in the literature, and consequently that gapping might have other meanings for the youth in this study. In this article, gapping is conceptualized as a negative choice *away* from more schooling, rather than a positive choice *toward* the gap year's perceived horizon-broadening experiences. The students in the study reported facing a dilemma in which the perceived abundance of possible educational and employment options became overwhelming. They planned for a gap year as a kind of time-out to figure out what to do next.

The study is situated in Norway, and its upper secondary VET system. Taking a year off between upper secondary school and higher education represents an increasingly legitimate practice for young people. Norway fits within what Walther (2006) classifies as the universalistic Nordic youth transition regime, contrasted to the liberal (UK), the employment-centred (Germany and France), and the sub-protective (Italy and Spain) regimes. The Nordic regime is characterised by a comprehensive school system, a generous welfare state, and high levels of social capital (Wollebæk & Seggaard, 2011). Within this regime, Walther (2006) states, adolescents are encouraged and supported by education and welfare options in experimenting with 'yo-yo' transitions, as long as they do so within the system's framework.

The young people in the study were undertaking vocational education for service work, i.e., the Sales trade and the Office and administration trade. In Norway, vocational education in general, and service work-directed vocational programmes in particular, are characterised by significantly lower completion rates compared to general academic upper secondary tracks (Lillejord, Halvorsrud, Ruud et al., 2015). Research on dropout has only to a small degree addressed the students' considerations and decision-making processes in relation to dropping out or remaining in the education system (Wahlgren, Aarkrog, Mariager-Anderson, Gottlieb & Larsen, 2018; Reegård & Rogstad, 2016). By focusing on VET students' reasoning behind this decision, and how they legitimate their choices, the article adds to the body of literature by placing emphasis on the students' subjective accounts of their uncertain ways through the VET system.

The article is structured as follows. Next, the article presents the analytical framework guiding the analysis, before outlining the context of the study, data, and methods. VET students' subjective reasoning and justifications of becoming a gapper are then analysed in two sections: the anguish of choosing and gapping as postponement. In the final section, the article discusses potential implications of the findings in relation to the national VET system and individualistic tendencies in society.

Analytical framework

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on VET by elucidating how vocational students in weakly established vocational trades, who face great uncertainty construct coherent life narratives, and the meaning-making strategies they draw on. In order to grasp the ways vocational students reason and legitimise a gap year, the article employs the notion of 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2007). Neither under- nor over socialised, it denotes individual agency, albeit subject to constraints (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). In the article, the concept of bounded agency serves as an interpretive framework for the students' reasoning, which is presented in the subsequent section. This notion accentuates the (un)structuring effects of the Sales trade and the Office and administration trade – illustrating how action is bounded and restricted within the loosely structured environments of service sector VET, yet the very same loose structures enable creativity, innovation and active participation in creating coherent narratives (Reegård, 2017b). Uncertainty and openness require agency and adaptive competences in order to manage meaningful decisions between alternative pathways to employment (Heinz, 2009).

The literature emphasises that the 'need' for individuals to search for meaning and construct coherent narratives, both as an 'internal dialogue' and to tell others, has become increasingly important (Linde, 1993). The presentation of a 'cohesive' self is conceptualised as a social obligation to represent events as revealing plausible causal connections (Devadason, 2007). The article is concerned with students' meaning-making processes as premises of action, understood as the process by which people turn circumstances into comprehensible situations, which again serve as a springboard for action. Furthermore, meaning-making is conceived as an on-going retrospective process, in which we rationalise behaviour, yet also as prospective through the narratives we tell of ourselves. Both retrospective justifications of past events and anticipations of the future are organised to provide a coherent self-concept which directs action, and provides individuals with a sense of personal continuity through time (Leccardi 2008; Mead [1932] 1959; Thornton et al., 2012).

The study

The study was carried out in Norway. The national VET system is designed according to a 2 + 2 model. This refers to the division of the standard 4-year model into 2 years of school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship. The apprenticeship period consists of workplace training guided by state-issued curricula in training-authorized companies. Vocational students who pass the trade examination achieve a trade certificate in a particular trade. Vocational programmes do not provide general entry qualifications to higher education, and

vocational tracks generally suffer from disparity of esteem compared to the general academic track.

VET directed toward the labour market sectors of industry and crafts in Norway is characterised by a quite well-functioning tripartite system, where the vocational certificate provides youth with clear occupational paths as a basis for career progression. However, VET for the service sector, which the students in the study were pursuing, is weakly established in the Norwegian labour market. This vocational education suffers from low labour market currency. Rather, employers have come to prefer training and recruitment practices disconnected from the VET system (Reegård, 2017a). The current situation is that of a VET programme in which only one-third of the students complete apprenticeship. Fifty percent of the students leave the VET trajectory after the 2 years of school-based education to undertake 1-year courses of supplementary studies in order to qualify for higher education (Høst, Seland & Skålholt, 2013).

This study was part of a national research project (spanning 2012–2015) covering a broad range of topics on the quality of the Norwegian VET system. More specifically, it was integrated in a project module investigating the relation of learning environment to completion of training. The interviewees were in the second year of the VET programme called 'Sales, Service & Security.' Students following the normal progression were then about to start apprenticeships in companies. About half of the sample planned to take a gap year, switch VET programme, or take a one-year course of supplementary studies to qualify for higher education. This article concentrates on those who talked about taking a gap year. This sample was comprised of eight individuals.

The study comprised classes in six upper-secondary schools distributed in three (out of 19) counties in Norway: Telemark, Nord-Trøndelag, and Rogaland. Within each class, six to eight students were individually interviewed, adding up to 43 students aged 17–20 in total. The students were selected to ensure gender variation and diversity in educational and apprenticeship intentions and learning motivation. Shortly after the school visits, immediate impressions were written in field notes. All interviews were then recorded, transcribed, and analysed by clustering data by key topic, i.e., justifications of a gap year. Categories and patterns in the data were identified by text-close coding.

Investigating how young people frame and justify becoming gappers enables an examination of both their subjective understandings of legitimate and illegitimate reasons for taking educational time-outs and how they draw upon cultural resources in this process. The students were interviewed on educational and occupational choice-making, and their approaches to employment and becoming skilled. The themes pursued included the following key questions: What were their plans and dreams related to education and work? How did they experience uncertainties and constraints in the fields of education and work? Thus, issues relating to gapping were not part of the original focus of the interviews but rather

emerged as significant as the interviews progressed. The interviews also included the occupation/employment status of the student's parents. Most students' parents were in manual occupations or receiving social benefits. In the two subsequent sections, I analyse what kind of moral evaluations were used by the interviewees to explain and give meaning to their choices and experiences standing on the threshold of adulthood.

The anguish of choosing

In Norway, the transition from lower to upper secondary education, and the choice of a general academic track or a vocational track, represents a potential structural turning point because it is the first-time young people are obliged to make a choice that will influence their educational path. The data tell of young people stumbling into vocational education for service work by happenstance, as expressed by Martine, aged 17:

To be honest, I didn't know, really. There were so many options, and I didn't know what to choose, so, I just applied for this [service sector-directed vocational education]. But then I thought that there are really many opportunities It's easy to get a job anywhere.

The open-minded nature of their entry into these programmes was illustrated by how little knowledge they had of what to expect from vocational education or which other vocational programmes to choose. For some, vocational education for retail and office jobs was not their preferred choice; however, insufficient grades in lower secondary school meant that other educational options were unattainable.

Unlike the better-established vocational education for industry and crafts, the vocational programme directed toward the service sector is weakly established in the Norwegian labour market and does not provide transparent occupational paths. Thus, the job-directed education provides few 'navigational tools' that students can use to orientate their learning experiences, and students often have difficulty formulating their future careers (Reegård, 2016). While vocational education does not provide access to higher education, more than half of the students enrolled in service sector-directed programmes switch to a supplementary year of academic subjects in order to obtain such access.

The arbitrary and ambivalent nature of their choice-making might be rooted in a lack of transparency, defined as 'how well young people can see through the system to plot a course from where they are in the present to find a distant future goal' (Hamilton & Hurrelmann, 1994, p. 331). The students of the study were forced to choose a course of education and training without knowing which course to enter – they had 'no choice but choosing' (Giddens 1991, p. 81), or as Bauman (1998) puts it, 'all of us are doomed to the life of choices' (p. 86), even if

we do not have the means to really make them. However, what the students were certain of was a change toward more practical-oriented learning, thus they chose vocational education over general academic education. This was expressed by Susanne (18):

I figured this [service sector-directed vocational education] was the best fit, what suited me best. I didn't want the general academic track. I hate theory and such. I get wary.

Another typical response is exemplified by Martin, aged 17: 'I'm not really someone who loves school and stuff. I want to do something else.' The students commonly described themselves as 'school-wary.' They seemed to like hanging out at school with their friends, but when asked to specify what it was about school, they were tired of, it was 'homework, tests, and just sitting in the classroom all day' (Stine, aged 18). Several chose a vocational track over the general academic track to avoid more school and 'theory.' However, they were disappointed when it turned out that the two school-based years of the vocational education also involved blackboard teaching, homework, and tests. When asked if the vocational education hitherto met his expectations, Martin responded, 'No, it was all more school.' However, the alternative, that is, what this 'something else' should be, was yet to be decided. Martin continued, 'But you have got to have education if you want to go places.'

Thus, Martin displayed dissonance, a mismatch between his self-understanding as school-wary and his perception of the need for higher education to access the labour market. Martin did not care too much for the idea of continuing school by entering university, but at the same time he was confident that he could do it, so it turned out that was what he wanted or needed. However, he was still lacking a clear idea of whether he wanted to commence further studies or of what he wanted to study. The students' narratives testify to acceptance, or rather resignation, in relation to formal education as a prerequisite for getting a decent job, as an expression of the institutional dependence in the wake of individualisation as described by Beck (1992). In the current climate in Norway, where almost all of the youth cohort proceeds from lower to upper secondary education, in parallel with the massive expansion of higher education, the relative deprivation of remaining outside the 'knowledge society' has become increasingly intolerable (e.g. Vogt, 2016). This was reproduced in the students' narratives: some appeared to adhere to the value of the need for further education in order to avoid unemployment, alluding to the human capital narrative, emphasising the importance of higher levels of qualifications for gaining better chances of employment. Thus, exiting upper secondary education without a certificate was perceived as limiting one's chances in the labour market.

To previous generations, choice of education was characterised by an *absence* of decisions, fitting into the everyday flow of actions without the need for

retrospective rationalisations (Grytnes, 2011). Contemporary biographies, in contrast, mean that more has become open to choice, whereas the consequence of that choice has to be borne by the individual. Young people are confronted with an overwhelming amount of options, and choice of education and labour market destination have taken centre stage. At the same time, they are forced to reflect on the available options and justify their decisions. Mia's (17) statement of wanting 'to keep all options open,' rooted in indeterminacy over the perceived abundance of choice, was typical of the data material. She is dreading making an irreversible decision because it seems too soon to make choices about what and who to become. In line with Du Bois-Reymond (1998), the pragmatic statement 'I don't want to commit myself yet' characterises the current sample, as well as the mentality of many young people across Europe today. Thus, the students decided not to decide (yet). The 'pause button' they needed turned out to be a gap year.

Gapping as postponement

The enhanced profile of the gap year is described as an institutionalised opportunity that 'increases cultural capital for the definition of today's young middle-class identities' (Bagnoli, 2009, p. 342). However, in line with Hjort (2016), who found that the option of taking a gap year appears to be relevant across the social spectrum, the 'gappers-to-be' from working-class backgrounds also expressed the desire to take a gap year:

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|-------------|--|
| Researcher: | So, what are your plans for the upcoming fall? |
| Trine: | Um, I'm thinking of taking a gap year. |
| Researcher: | Have you made any plans for the gap year yet? |
| Trine: | No. My mum works in this small cleaning company. Maybe I'll work there or something. I don't know yet. |

The prevailing gapping discourse of what constitutes 'worthwhile' activity during a gap year emphasises 'proper' travel, accruing benefits, making a contribution, and enjoying oneself (Snee, 2014b). These activities are, however, very different from the (un)planned gapping reality of the students in the study. In the above interview extract, Trine, aged 17, undecided as to what she would fill the gap year with, the same indecisiveness she displayed when talking about her choice of education. When asked why she wanted to take a gap year, Trine responded that it was 'to figure out what I want to do.' At the time of the interview, she had absolutely no idea. Thus, gapping represented a wait-and-see strategy when stuck in an option dilemma; students were school-wary and lacked a clear conception of what they wanted to do next, yet not ready to leave the education system for good. This wait-and-see strategy represented a 'comfortable' state, given that it did not require them to make any difficult decisions at this point. However, to Sigrid (18), gapping did explicitly represent an 'emergency exit':

I'm really fed up with school. I think I'll just take a gap year and work at Shell [gas station].

To Sigrid, a gap year justified her exiting school. It was easier to construct a narrative of taking a gap year, than to outright say she was leaving school. Perhaps did she also have plans of returning at some point.

Daniel, aged 19, used gapping as a backup plan. He, too, was undecided and struggled with formulating his future plans. He had applied for an apprenticeship, but he was ambivalent about the idea of taking one on. If it turned out he was unable to secure one, he would take a gap year. He did not plan for eventualities, so he had no idea which activities the gap year could consist of. At the same time, he kept talking about his 'true dream':

Daniel: I learned that this [service sector-directed vocational education] wasn't something for me. I think it's boring; it's all the same.

Researcher: Do you consider choosing this education as a mistake?

Daniel: Yes, it just doesn't interest me. It's not the line of work that suits me. I'm thinking of a gap year.

Researcher: Initially, you told me you were a little bit more motivated?

Daniel: Yes, but that was the first year. It got worse the second year. Just more boring, really.

Researcher: Regarding the path forward, what are your plans and dreams?

Daniel: You mean right now? I really want to start in the military. You know, work out with the guys and stuff.

Researcher: So, if you don't get an apprenticeship, that's your plan?

Daniel: Yes, right now it is. There's not so much for me to do here. The military would have been good for me. Go away, travel and stuff.

To Daniel, gapping represented a legitimate plan B, and one of several potential options. Like Trine, Daniel solved the 'choice-option problem' by accepting flexibility and adopting a strategy of wait and see. Common to the students; they planned for neither volunteering nor overseas travel, activities which are the 'gold standard' of gapping (Heath, 2007).

The interview data provided a window into how the students made sense of their situation. Those looking for a way to put their education on hold, or seeking a way out, had internalised and adopted a gapping discourse. The cultural mantra that every man is the architect of his own fortune implies that it is illegitimate to call the (temporary) exit from the education system 'doing nothing.' Doing nothing was instead framed as doing *something*.

Except for one student who had absolutely no plans for the upcoming gap year and Daniel, the rest planned to have paid work – most likely in the retail sector,

which absorbs a great number of young people without formal qualifications in Norway (Jordfald & Mühlbradt, 2015). Paradoxically, if they had stayed in school and commenced the apprenticeship integrated in the vocational education, they still would have most likely ended up in the retail sector. King (2011) argues that the gap year represents 'an interruption in institutional transitions and consequently in some young people's transition to adulthood' (p. 341). To the students, gapping was used to prolong adolescent status by taking a break to figure things out; however, by entering the workforce full time, they may have been accelerating adult status by becoming economically independent.

In the prevailing literature, gapping is depicted as a way for adolescents to reflexively construct their identity, that is, to 'find themselves' and subsequently decide on a career path. However, rather than justifying the gap year with doing something worthwhile, the 'articulated rationalities' for gapping included to gain time to find out what to become, that is, postpone the choice of further education and occupational career. Gapping constituted a way to legitimise, to themselves and to others, temporary or permanently dropping out of the educational system. The material suggests that the choice of training and occupation amongst these undecided students is partly the result of intense reflection, but also has a temporary or even arbitrary character insofar as it was always possible to revise a decision. Presented as a social obligation, it was considered illegitimate to attribute personal failure to external factors. One plausible narrative would be that they entered the education on false premises, they felt deceived, and they were nervous about what the future would bring. Rather, taking a gap year represented a way for the young people to exert agency and take charge of their own lives, indicating adherence to individualised values of independence and autonomy. The alternative strategy of claiming structural disadvantage does not appear to be attractive, perhaps signalling resignation or a loss of such autonomy.

The students made choices according to their preferences and intentions yet did so within the scope of finite opportunities. The decision of opting for a gap year presented itself as an individual and highly personal act, yet the students' narratives conformed to similar, and common, moral scripts. This is understood in light of adolescents' internalisation of contemporary and individualised cultural values. This emphasises the significance of intersubjectivity in youth lives and youth transitions, as a shared sense of what is considered worthwhile as something which is agreed and negotiated between subjects, where lines are drawn between experiences that do and do not have worth (cf. Snee, 2014b). By representing dominant understandings, the students are situated within a shared, intersubjectively constituted consensus.

Despite having quite disparate future orientations, the students shared an adherence to a discourse of individual autonomy. Simultaneously being within and outside the mainstream, the accounts of the students' attitudes of 'trying out to find out' appear both common and accepted.

Discussion

The article has analysed how VET students in Norway who lack school motivation draw on gap year reasoning in search of ways to put their educational journey on hold. The findings indicate that the students seemed stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they were school-wary, opting for vocational education to quickly access the labour market. On the other hand, they perceived obtaining the upper secondary certificate, and perhaps even higher education, as necessary in order to get a decent job. Thus, taking a gap year represented a strategy to postpone making important decisions and was perceived as a legitimate break from school. While gapping, subsequent plans could be worked out.

The young people's interpretations of the opportunities they faced were informed by their internalisation of individualised gapping discourses. The notion of extensive or even limitless options frequently occurred in students' deliberations about their future plans, and the agony of choosing was evident. The 'ethic of self-fulfilment,' which characterises individualised cultures, appears internalised by the individuals to the extent that it becomes central to their self-understanding. This manifested in an overwhelming perceived choice abundance, although choosing was rendered difficult due to the lack of moral guidelines for which choice was the right one to make.

The data from the study do not tell us whether the students ever returned to vocational education or pursued other types of education or whether they remained dropouts, disconnected from the educational system. The following observations are necessarily speculative as to whether and how the type of transitions young people make has a bearing upon their future life chances. When young people are 'pushed' into gapping as a result of negative choice-making, their transitions may be more tenuous and fragmented, and they themselves possibly more vulnerable to dropping out than those who plan for a gap year with a conception of what types of activities they will undertake during that time and what further education remains to be completed later. However, statistics show that 46 percent of all trade certificates in Norway are completed by adults (Bratsberg, Nyen & Raaum, 2017). This implies that several resume vocational education more motivated and mature than they were before their time off. One alternative viewpoint would be that gapping could be considered rational in the absence of reliable information about either the future labour market or one's own abilities and interests at a young age. Further longitudinal research exploring the implications of these types of gap year behaviour would enable us to reveal the extent to which it is advantageous or detrimental to young people's longer-term labour market chances.

The Sales and the Office and administration trade provide poor navigational tools to help students orientate their learning experiences. Based on national research, the Sales and the Office and administration trade have not been successful

in attracting the student mass or in engaging employers, nor have skilled retail and office work become embedded in the society as powerful social and occupational categories (Høst, Reegård, Reiling, Skålholt & Tønder, 2015; Olsen, Reegård, Seland & Skålholt, 2015). Thus, the students' occupational orientations become vague and unsettled. By studying VET students who lack the means to use gapping as a way to gain advantages, the article has aimed to supplement and extend the existing body of research on the ways in which young people create coherent life narratives within the setting of weakly established vocational trades.

Note on contributor

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