Title: Group guidance as retention strategy and dropout prevention – the untapped potentials of group guidance

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Abstract: While there is extensive research into school guidance and counselling services, group counselling and of course educational dropout, there seems to be less research on the specific combination of group guidance as a strategy to reduce dropout. This paper explores how guidance and counselling practitioners in Danish upper secondary school experience the implementation of group guidance as a strategy to retain students and prevent drop out. As part of a study of retention practices in upper secondary schools, we analyse eight narrative interviews practitioners and managers. Based on the research question, What makes group guidance and counselling meaningful in relation to reducing dropout – why and how, the reflexive thematic analysis conceptualise three themes: a) Role of a guidance practitioner and aim b) Student roles and possibilities for participation, and c) Organisational changes. We discuss these themes in relation to the role of guidance in upper secondary education in Denmark.

Keywords: Group guidance, dropout prevention, upper secondary education, careers guidance, belonging.

Relation to the conference theme: The preliminary results of our research shows how the implementation of group guidance as a dropout prevention strategy enables guidance counsellors to work with guidance in a way that to a great extent allow them to work professionally and along the lines of international guidelines for guidance practitioners regarding purpose as well as ethics. Furthermore, when group guidance focuses on the community of students rather than the individual, this enables students to participate as active and agentic parties of the guidance and thus, group guidance may be a way to mitigate individualising practices in relation to student retention.
Introduction and objective: Early school leaving – or dropout - is linked to serious consequences such as unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health, and thus an issue of continuing and international concern. Group guidance initiatives as a means or strategy to reduce dropout from upper secondary education programmes is the focus for this paper. One of the most influential theorists in the field of student retention is the American sociologist Vincent Tinto, who advocates for schools to focus on supporting student persistence and to this end argues that students learning together in learning communities experience several positive effects e.g. shared knowledge, shared knowing and shared responsibility (Tinto 2021). A review by (Muha & Cole 1991) of dropout and group counselling in general states, that group counselling often has been used effectively to change a student’s self-concept, to improve classroom behavior, and to produce an internal locus of control, all of which can affect students’ decision to leave or stay in school (Muha & Cole 1991: 78). They sum up the potential of group counselling in relation to dropout as indicated by the research included in the review; group counselling can serve more people at a time, because the group is made up of one's peers, the individual will feel more secure than in a one-to-one intervention with a counselor and finally, the participants in group counselling are likely to regard the feedback from peers as trustworthy making the group setting a place for reconciling differences in their self-concept and others concept of them. Thus, the aim of this paper is to explore how guidance and counselling practitioners in Danish upper secondary school experience the implementation of group guidance as a strategy to retain students and prevent drop out.

Theoretical framework: Drawing on Braun & Clarke’s (2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, this is the theoretical basis of our analysis. At the heart of this approach is ‘the researcher’s role in knowledge production […] The coding process requires a continual bending back on oneself – questioning and querying the assumptions we are making in interpreting and coding the data. Themes are analytic outputs developed through and from the creative labour of our coding. They reflect considerable analytic ‘work,’ and are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity. […] Themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves. (Braun & Clarke 2019:6). As such, a number of theoretical assumption has informed our coding of the interviews and the three themes that we have generated from the analysis.
Methodology: We draw on data from a larger DK-based study of retention practices and strategies in upper secondary schools. For this part of the study, we conducted eight narrative interviews with 11 guidance and counselling practitioners and managers, who all participated the larger study. They were asked to share their experiences of working group guidance practices in relation to reducing dropout. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Inspired by Braun & Clarke (2019), we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews. According to Braun and Clarke, “qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling ‘stories’, about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the ‘truth’ that is either ‘out there’ and findable from, or buried deep within, the data” (Clarke & Braun 2019, 3). Themes are ‘stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset’ (Clarke & Braun 2019, 4) and they are initially generated by researchers during analysis rather than awaiting retrieval. Thus, our thematic analysis explored how the interviewees described their experiences with group guidance, and how and in what ways group guidance and counselling became meaningful for different aspect of their professional practice.

Expected results

Across the eight interviews, it is evident that when a) guidance practitioners alter the focus, e.g. as the content of a guidance session is no longer primarily a matter of presenting the students with their absence statistics, missed home assignments and the consequences of this, and b) the structure of their guidance, from individual to group based, this results in a number of changes. Changes to their own role as a guidance practitioner, to the purpose of the guidance and counselling practice of the school, to the students’ role as an active participant in the guidance and in school, and to the position of guidance in the organization.

These findings will be discussed in relation to the seemingly untapped potential of group guidance and counselling in colleges providing upper secondary education in Denmark. Finally, we will put forward suggestions for practice and research on the grounds of these discussions.

Bibliographical references

