

Gap Years – resisting institutional pressure

According to UK-based studies, an increasing number of students take a so-called gap year before entering higher education (Heath, 2007). In Denmark, three of four students entering a bachelor programme at a Danish university in 2012 had taken at least one gap year. One in five of the entrants had taken three years or more (Ministeriet for Forskning Innovation og Videregående Uddannelser, 2012). This is an issue of political concern and during the past decade different measures have been introduced to increase the number of students entering higher education right after completing upper-secondary school.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the gap year as a choice that is sensible to the students. Students' choice of higher education is a process occurring over time where they balance different interests, concerns, and expectations (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2012). The choices are made and justified through the students' constructions of narratives that serve both to make the choices comprehensible to the students' social environment and to construct an identity (Bruner, 2004). Hence, identity work is an important component in student transitions and the gap year plays a part in this process (King, 2010).

Method

The analysis builds on data produced as a part of project studying students' choice of higher education and their transition into higher education in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Six final year upper-secondary school classes (in total 134 students) were selected at different schools in a variety of neighbourhoods. Based on a survey about the students' school experiences and their thoughts and aspirations for their future study course, 38 students were selected for interview before completing upper-secondary school. Half the students were interviewed individually, the rest in groups. All 134 students were contacted by the beginning of the following academic year. Of the 38 students, 24 took one gap year or more. Some had started at a STEM-education, some at a non-STEM and some had opted for a gap year. Based on their educational choices 23 students were selected and interviewed individually up to three times during the following two years using narrative semi-structured interviews. Nine were interviewed during their gap year. The interviews were verbatim transcribed.

The analysis was carried out as a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and informed by a narrative psychological approach. We particularly focused on those sequences where the students addressed issues relating to their taking a gap year or not.

Preliminary results

When interviewed just before completing upper-secondary school a substantial number of the students told that they needed to get time off. This is reflected in the word the students used for the gap year: a sabbatical or 'taking a break'. The gap year was seen as an intermission in an otherwise continuous trajectory taking them from secondary to tertiary education. The students craved for a year where they are relieved of the pressure of the educational system, both in terms of the work load and of the pressure of achieving high GPAs. Since students in Denmark are admitted at university based on their GPA from upper-secondary school, higher GPAs would keep more opportunities open when they were to select which study programme to enter. One male student said that he had experienced that his time belonged to the school and he wished to have a break from that experience.

Another reason for taking a gap year was to postpone the decision about what study programme to apply for. Students needed the year to reflect further on which path to follow – either because they have some ideas they need to consider and investigate closer or because they need time to think about what they really wish to study. Finding the study programme that is right for them is important because the choice of study is closely related to the construction of an identity and a narrative about who they are. This narrative should both provide viable scenarios of the young people as students of the particular programme and of them following a career within the particular field.

Many students considering taking a gap year would go travelling or attending a folk high school, a special kind of school with no exams where the students live for three months or more participating in different activities, frequently creative activities (music, dance, writing), sports, or general education (literature, contemporary social issues). Due to the cost of these plans, most of the students would take on paid work during the year. However, some of the students also planned on taking a gap year but had still not entirely decided what to do.

Finally, gap years may also have become a part of a 'normal biography' (Alheit, 1990), that is, a phase or experience that is culturally and socially considered natural and therefore something that students just do because it is expected. A student who entered a programme without taking a gap year experienced being 'the odd one out'.

Implications for practice and research

The main point of the study is that the students' inclination to take a gap year could be considered a reaction, even resistance, to the institutional pressure they experience in the educational system. It is a pressure for attainment and for succeeding in constructing a path that is in accordance with the identity they try to construct and the narrative supporting this narrative. Similar patterns are reported, for instance by Jones (2004), but the gap year as a refuge from institutional pressure needs to be emphasised.

Consequently, if students are pushed too hard by political decisions to enter and complete higher education more quickly this might hamper their motivation and increase the risk of dropping out. Research should not only consider the ambivalence of students towards education that is inherent in the way they conceive of the gap year (distancing from the pressure without questioning the need for education), but also that the normal biography might make gap years something occurring by default rather than a decision.

References

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