Risk and Protective Factors in Choosing Course Sets in Secondary Education: Perspectives of Career Counsellors and Students from the Latgale Region of Latvia

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Abstract. This paper presents an exploratory study of the perspectives of career counsellors and students on risk and protective factors in choosing course sets in secondary education. The study, conducted in the Latgale region of Latvia, uses a qualitative research design based on a triangulation between the perspectives of school career counsellors and students. Data obtained from interviews with four career counselors and a focus group with six 15–16 year old students from urban and rural schools were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study acknowledges that school career counsellors can serve as a vital resource for Latvian society in managing and addressing the challenges of current educational reform and inequalities in education and career management caused by socioeconomic disparities.
Keywords: career counseling, transition to secondary school, school career counsellor, course sets, risk factors, protective factors.

Rizikos ir apsauginiai veiksniai renkantis mokymosi turinį vidurinėje mokykloje: Latvijos Latgalos regiono karjeros konsultantų ir studentų požiūris

Santrauka. Straipsnyje pristatomas karjeros konsultantų ir studentų požiūrio į rizikos ir apsauginius veiksnius renkantis mokymosi turinį vidurinėje mokykloje tyrimas. Latvijos Latgalos regione atliktas kokybinis mokyklos karjeros konsultantų ir mokinių požiūrio trianguliacija grindžiamas tyrimas. Duomenys surinkti iš interviu su keturiais karjeros konsultantais ir tikslinę šešių 15–16 metų mokinių iš miesto ir kaimo mokyklų grupe, duomenys analizuoti

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naudojant teminės analizės metodą. Tyrime atskleista, kad mokyklų karjeros konsultantai gali pasitarnauti kaip gyvybiškai svarbus Latvijos visuomenės išteklius valdant ir sprendžiant dabartinės švietimo reformos iššūkius bei įveikiant socialinių ir ekonominių skirtumų keliamą nelygybę švietimo ir karjeros valdymo srityje.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: karjeros konsultavimas, perėjimas į vidurinę mokyklą, mokyklos karjeros konsultantai, mokymosi turinys, rizikos veiksniai, apsauginiai veiksniai.

Introduction

The new paradigm of metamodernism (Pipere, 2021) gradually takes over all social and cultural discourses and urges the transformation of education toward sustainable solutions globally and locally through an engagement in dialogue with the situation in the world. It is even more evident during times of global crisis and challenges such as pandemics, ecological crises, and digital transformation, to name just a few. The higher education field and the labor market are now looking for much better prepared and motivated secondary school graduates, focusing both on the unique strengths of the pupils and their transversal competencies. In countries that implement the choice of subjects in the transition of secondary schools, the period of transition from an elementary to secondary school requires particular attention, care, mechanisms of institutional support, as well as continuously updated research evidence.

Beginning with the school year 2020/2021, the project Competence Approach to the Curriculum (School 2030), implemented by the National Centre for Education, has come into force in Latvia, affecting the education system from kindergartens to secondary education institutions. The project aims to develop, assess and succeedingly implement curriculum and teaching approaches for general education to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for modern life. Within five years, the project envisages the revision and improvement of the current curricula, elaboration and approbation of renewed curricula, and design of new syllabi and teaching materials for school subjects (Skola 2030, 2019).

According to the project, the new secondary education model features an introduction of three types of courses (basic, advanced, and specialized), combined into sets of courses. Students can choose a set of courses from at least two mandatory sets (each consisting of three advanced courses) offered in any secondary school. The number of sets provided and their content mostly depend on the internal resources of the school, which differ between the regions and localities of Latvia. As the professional experience of the authors shows, most schools, especially in rural areas of the Latgale region, an economically less developed region of Latvia (Sipilova et al., 2017), provide the minimum number of sets. Since any decision of students related to course selection affects the possibilities of their career development, the choice of course sets has become a concern for school career counselors (CCs).

There are a couple of reasons for the choice of the Latgale region of Latvia for this qualitative study. First, there is a strong correlation between the level of advancement of scientific research and the standard of living in a given country (Badr, 2018) or region

of the country, as in the given case. Second, as is common for qualitative studies, the research context and problem are usually closely connected with the personal experience of researchers (Boudah, 2011) – the authors of this paper live and work in the Latgale region and have a long experience with educational and career counselling matters in the region. Third, the focus on research in less developed regions is an important tool for reducing inequality, helping with the policy coherence for development, and promoting the sustainable development of the entire country (Sachs et al., 2019).

A school's CC conducts career planning and building activities at the educational institution and provides individual counseling to students on educational opportunities and current developments in the labor market. In the study year 2019/2020, 369 school CCs were employed at Latvian schools, working with approximately 150,000 students (Burceva, 2020a). According to a recent study, the professional competencies of CCs and school CCs are sufficiently developed in Latvia (Dišlere & Vronska, 2020). It is important that these competencies would also be sufficient to deal with the new challenges of educational reform in Latvia, especially in terms of the necessary support for the selection of course sets.

Having briefly sketched the context of the study, we should refine the main contours of the research problem of the presented study, determining the aim, theoretical background, and research questions of this exploration. It is obvious that students in Latvia, willing to continue their education in secondary schools after grade 9, currently need to make the intricate choice of course sets, which adds to their hardships of school transition in times of introducing educational reforms in Latvia. Thus, students need both multidimensional and expert support to make this choice right. One of the specialists who could provide the most relevant and sustainable help with this choice, due to their professional competencies and duties, is the school CC. So, it would be important to know how both CCs and students view this situation of selection of course sets, how they perceive each other in this discourse, and what risk and protective factors they see in this situation, considering the educational, cultural, economic, and geographical specifics of the Latgale region of Latvia, especially in light of the urban-rural divide in the field of education.

The urgency of the given problem is also determined by the scarcity of studies on the subject choice during the transition from primary to secondary school and the lack of research on the views of students and the role of school CCs in the given situation. Therefore, each new study in this field can become a significant contribution to the interdisciplinary dialogue of education and career development. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the authors have chosen the qualitative research strategy, which allows them to dive into the less studied topics and areas and hear the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Thus, this study aims to describe the main risk and protective factors, perceived by students and school CCs, related to the selection of course sets in general secondary schools in the Latgale region of Latvia.

Theoretical background

As the analysis of literature shows, no previous studies so far have investigated the choice of course sets at the threshold of secondary schools from the viewpoint of career counsellors and students; just a few studies have paid attention to the choice of subjects, course sets, or curricula (Davies et al., 2009; Lee, 1993; Smith et al., 2006, 2008). Several quite recent publications have focused on choosing STEM subjects in secondary school (Chan & Cheung, 2018; Lyons, 2006; Lyons & Quinn, 2010; Tolstrup Holmegaard, 2015), though this avenue of research actually covers only one specific subtopic of a larger problem presented in a given study. Thus, the scientific findings and normative documents described in further chapters will be tangentially linked with the perspectives of CCs and students on the choice of course sets in secondary education and will provide different frames of reference to embed the abovementioned research problem in current discourses related to students' concerns during the transition to a secondary school, the subject's choice in a framework of educational reforms, and the role of career counseling for the transition to a secondary school.

Transition to a secondary school and student concerns

Even without the requirement of choosing the sets of courses, the transition process from a primary to secondary school is not always smooth and easy, as many factors determine the challenging nature of this specific transition. Until now, previous studies have stressed that the transition to a secondary school envisages simultaneous changes in a wide range of factors. One of the approaches that addresses the structure and content of this phenomenon views changes in both the organizational structure of the school environment and the social role and expectations of students (Rice, Frederickson, & Seymour, 2011). However, in this study, we draw on the more general approach suggesting the division of transitional factors into contextual and personal factors (Vaz, 2010) or the external and internal aspects of the transition from a primary to secondary school. By explaining these factors, we will focus on the aspects relevant to the Latvian school system, considering that this transition in Latvia on average occurs at the age of 15–16 years.

The list of external or contextual aspects of transition can be started with the change of school and out-of-school environment, making the transition within the same school building, the transition to a different school in the same town, a different school in another town, or the transition from a rural to urban school (Anderson et al., 2000; Ashton, 2008). The other major issue is the establishment of new relationships. In the socially sensitive period of adolescence, relationships with new classmates, loss of old friends, and the possibility of bullying and isolation are important factors hindering the well-being of students (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Coffey, 2013; Pratt & George, 2005). Also, the relationships with quite many new teachers who do not know the students so well as compared to teachers working in primary schoola could become a significant challenge (Hanewald, 2013). Focusing on the teaching and learning process, new challenges, such

as changes in school subjects, new teaching methods, longer school days, and higher academic expectations from students themselves and others, can create some problems with academic attainment and student well-being (Boone & Demanet, 2020; McLellan & Galton, 2015; Gameson, 2006; Rice, Frederickson & Seymour, 2011; Topping, 2011; Zeedijk et al., 2003). Additional difficulties could be related to the discontinuity between primary and secondary schools (Inch & Hewetson, 2001) and the lack of curriculum continuity in terms of curriculum structure and content between primary and secondary schools (Coad & Jones, 1999).

The internal or personal aspects of transition are mainly related to the enhanced individual responsibility and autonomy of students (Coffey, 2013; Elias, 2002; Rice et al., 2011) and the requirements for greater physical, social, psychological, and emotional resilience (Bailey & Baines, 2012; Rice et al., 2011; Spernes, 2020).

Finally, there are some sociodemographical factors that have an impact on successful school transition. For instance, boys and girls have different perceptions of transition (van Rens et al., 2019); girls can be more vulnerable to the worries about the transition, although the evidence is not quite conclusive (Anderson et al., 2000). Gender differences in educational attainment after transition are mostly related to the subject area (McGee et al.,2003). The important factor that has an impact on the transition is the SES of the students. Low SES is associated with less positive transitions (Evangelou et al., 2008; McGee et al., 2003: West et al., 2010). Transitions to higher secondary education and careers can be significantly more difficult for students in rural areas than for their peers in cities (Rosvall, 2020). This could be related to the uneven development between rural and urban areas around the world, in Europe, and Latvia. Studies show the increasing divisions between rural and urban areas in terms of economic growth, access to social services (including schools) and employment possibilities (Bernard, 2019; Gurley, 2016; Jia et al.,2017; Rignall & Atia, 2017; Sipilova et al., 2017). The career path of young people in rural areas has been portrayed mainly as leaving their residential area to expand educational and career options or remaining in a place that offers fewer opportunities (Farrugia, 2014; Forsey, 2015).

Although there are quite a large number of relatively recent studies targeting the peculiarities of the factors mentioned above, a much smaller proportion of research covers the aspects of this transition connected with career planning and decision-making, like the choice of a career path after primary school, or the responsible choice of study subjects (e.g., Anders et al., 2018; Balin & Hirschi, 2010; Davies et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2003; Perry, 2010). In Latvia, for example, there are several options for students to choose from after they graduate primary education (namely, grades 1–9): secondary school, gymnasium, professional school, evening secondary school, or joining the workforce. Other important career-related questions of this transition are associated with the choice of subjects or the selection of course sets, as is the case in Latvia. This issue will be discussed in a more detailed way in the next chapter of this paper.

Subject choice within the framework of educational reforms

Putting our study in an edifice of future education both globally and locally, we start by quoting Ehler (2020):

> Our schools must prepare them [citizens – *authors' note*] for jobs that do not yet exist, for technologies and applications that have not yet been invented, for living in a society whose social structures we cannot foresee today, and for dealing with challenges that are not yet discernible. It is our shared responsibility to make the most of the opportunities and find ways to deal with this uncertain future. It is about nothing more and nothing less than the preservation of our planet and our livelihoods. (pp. 1–2)

To answer these challenges, the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021–2027 (NDP 2027, 2020) specifies the development of the educational system with the effective use of new curricula and approaches in general education, sharing best practices in entrepreneurship and digital skills, education for sustainable development, future skills (creativity, flexibility, adaptability), STEM skills, and improvement of the educational environment: the introduction of digital solutions, individualization of the educational process, initiatives to promote the development of talent, and impactful career education.

Educational decision-makers all over the world are looking for the best solutions to improve educational attainment and provide future skills for graduates of secondary schools; one such approach is the specialization both between the schools and within the schools, with the latter ensuring the opportunity for the choice of school subjects within the school.

According to Davies and colleagues (Davies et al., 2009), the students might achieve higher grades if they can choose subjects to study, because they might 1) have a relative advantage in a particular subject arising from variation in their information processing abilities and personal learning history; 2) develop a self-concept of success in one specific subject, comparing their performance in this subject with others, and 3) find a subject more congruent with their interests and ambitions, leading to higher motivation. In the study with American students below grade 9, it was found that students were looking forward to increased independence in choosing courses and developing an academic plan (Smith et al., 2006; 2008).

As already mentioned, one of the dimensions of the new educational reform in Latvia is the opportunity to choose the sets of courses in secondary education. The new secondary education model involves a transition from the previous model with a large number of compulsory subjects (from 18 to 20, an average of 210 hours each) to a model in which at least 30% of the class time is devoted to in-depth studies according to students' interests, divided into three levels of study – general, optimal, and advanced. The general level implies the mandatory content for each pupil; the optimal level envisages the satisfactory versatile content for successful entering of higher education. The advanced level provides the subjects with enhanced and expanded content for deep knowledge in a narrow field. In grades 10–11, students attaining this level deepen and generalize the material of primary education, while in grades 11–12 they acquire deeper knowledge in

a narrower range of subject areas. The school designs thematically united sets of courses for in-depth study and specialization for the convenience of students, choosing the area of in-depth study. Each school should offer at least two sets, but the number, quality, and variety of sets depend on the resources of the school (Skola 2030, 2019).

The transition from a primary to secondary school requires special, well-planned, managed, and coordinated support from parents and multidisciplinary school teams usually consisting of principals / vice principals, teachers, psychoeducational consultants, social workers, and guidance counselors (Anderson et al., 2000). Within this team, a school's CC would take care of specific aspects of transition related to the career decision-making issues before the transition, development of career management skills for adolescents, and help with the selection of school subjects or course sets.

Career counselling for the transition to a secondary school

Career counseling is a field of qualified professional assistance for individuals in need of support and advice regarding the areas of study, career development, or career changes. CCs help people with different skills, values, and career motivations better understand their thoughts and feelings in these areas and make responsible decisions related to studies and careers (Counselling directory, 2021). Recently, career development has shown a rapid growth in theory and practice. In terms of theoretical models for career counseling, the latest trends are connected with postmodern discourse (Cook et al., 2005; Savickas, 2002; Young et al. 2002) and terms such as *ecological*, *feminist*, *constructivist*, *narrative*, *contextual*. According to Perry (2010), career counseling in the 21st century should accommodate the paradigm shift, emphasizing the role of context and culture, and considering the inequity between the rich and poor all over the world. He summons scholars to approach career counselling through the understanding of how social contexts and systems give meaning and provide life consequences. Such thinking asks for studies to use "nontraditional methods (e.g., qualitative, mixed methods) conducted on diverse populations that fall outside the status quo of career development research, that is, white middle-class college students" (Perry, 2010, p. 483).

Narrowing our focus to career counseling and career education in schools, it should be underlined that they are important not only in assisting in the immediate choices, but also in promoting lifelong learning and career development (Watts & Sultana, 2004). Speaking about the school CCs in Latvia, their duties are performed by qualified personnel with a bachelor's degree in education and a certificate that allows them to perform this work or a professional degree of Master of Education with the qualifications of a CC. Counselors work in close cooperation with students, their parents, teachers, school administration, the school's multidisciplinary team, and other parties involved. Among the professional duties of school CCs are methodological work, research, informative, and counseling-related support to students as well as engagement in continuous professional development. School CCs can, for example, help students in the search for relevant

educational institutions or professions, explore students' strengths and advantages, or provide advice in designing CVs or cover letters (Burceva, 2020b).

Overall, the CC is present in all transitions of students from one stage of education to the other and further into the workplace, from one environment of life, education and work to the other. It is only natural that school CCs should support the students in their transition from primary to secondary schools with all the career-related decision-making, career management and planning, and career adaptation problems. Crites (1969) has stated three conditions for vocational choice: 1) possession of alternatives, 2) a motivation to choose, and 3) the freedom to choose. Similarly, as Perry (2009) did with regard to the life experience of youth in South Africa, we could ask the question if these three conditions are prevalent in the selection of course sets for students in Latvia. The analysis of the situation shows that students have a choice in terms of the institution providing secondary education (several alternatives) and at least two options, of course, to choose from. Motivation to choose can be explained by both external and internal factors, while a lack of motivation can lead to dropping the choices of education or employment and becoming unemployed. Students also are free to choose; however, they often need support to make the optimal choice. A school's CC can help the students navigate these alternatives and provide support in case of all mentioned choices. Again, as regards the rural and urban division, while rural youth share many commonalities with their urban counterparts, the rural experience presents distinctions that can influence their life-career decisions. When working with rural youth, CCs should understand how the local economic situation, access to secondary and post-secondary education, and the scarcity of career exploration services shape the experiences of rural students (Chen & Doherty, 2021).

Taking into account all the factors mentioned above and according to the aim of exploring school CCs and students' perception of the situation related to the selection of course sets in general secondary schools in the Latgale region of Latvia, we set the following research questions to be answered in qualitative research:

1. *What are the challenges of course set selection perceived by career counselors from the Latgale region of Latvia?*
2. *What are the challenges of selecting the set of courses perceived by students in the Latgale region of Latvia?*
3. *What are the perceptions of career counselors from the Latgale region of Latvia about the protective factors associated with the selection of course sets?*
4. *What are the perceptions of students from the Latgale region of Latvia regarding the protective factors associated with the selection of course sets?*
5. *What are the differences in the perception of these challenges and protective factors in urban and rural schools?*

Method

Methodological approach

Increasing knowledge and challenging conventions, qualitative studies can be used as facilitators of social change, as well as in helping to know others and about them (Gergen et al., 2015). The presented study employs qualitative research based on the two qualitative research methods and a triangulation between the perspectives of school CCs and students. As previous research shows (Bailey & Baines, 2012), the students can have different views on the transition from primary to secondary schools from teachers. In this study, we assume the possibility of a similar discrepancy between the views of CCs and students on the same questions related to the research topic. In this study, data triangulation is integrated with methodological triangulation, as the data are collected from different research participants (CCs and students) and with different research methods (semi-structured interviews and focus groups); however, the leading type of triangulation is data triangulation. Using triangulation can enhance the reliability of the findings and enable saturation of the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Stavros & Wetberg, 2009).

Regarding the position or reflexivity of the researchers (Berger, 2013; Malterud, 2001) in this study, it should be mentioned that two authors are deeply involved with school career counseling as practitioners and educators and, therefore, are able to provide the view and interpretation from within. One author is an expert in qualitative research working in psychology and education, thus having the possibility to render the fresh outsider's view on career-related matters. In this way, the team of researchers, due to their personal and professional priorities, would be capable to collect and competently interpret the knowledge provided by counselling experts and students.

Participants and ethics

Based on administrative and publicly available data, a database of Latgale schools was created, indicating the number of offered course sets, course content, and school CCs data (taken from school websites). To ensure regional representativeness of urban and rural schools and to collect data from CCs with large counselling experience from different localities in Latgale, research participants (CCs) for the interviews were selected from the created database. A total of 40 experts were invited to the study, of which eight expressed their wish to participate. Of eight potential participants, one was not recruited due to insufficient experience, while three experts eventually refused to participate, citing a lack of time, competence, or fear for personal data. Therefore, four experts in the field of career counseling were invited to participate in interviews by phone or email. These were: participant A (41-year-old woman with 19 years of work experience who lives in a city); participant B (50-year-old female with 9 years of work experience who lives in a city), participant C (39-year-old male with 19 years of experience who lives in a rural area), participant D (48-year-old female with 28 years of work experience who

lives in a city). Informed consent was obtained from the interviewed CCs before they participated in the research.

To recruit students (focus group participants), youth workers, teachers, and students from various Latgale communities were interviewed to find out if students from grades 8–9 would be willing to participate in a focus group on the topic of transition and career choice. Through these gatekeepers (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016) it was possible to coordinate the possibility of contact, and potential research participants were invited to participate in the focus group through an internet-based environment. Some attrition was observed, as participation in the focus group was offered to 15–20 students. Of the eight potentially interested students, six students agreed to participate in the focus group. After receiving written permission from parents and coordinating the meeting time on the Zoom platform, the lead author of the article conducted focus groups. The focus group was conducted with six students, which coincides with the suggested lower limits for well-designed focus groups (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004). The students represented different schools in urban and rural areas (2 boys, 4 girls, one student from grade 8, five students from grade 9). These were: student A (15-year-old female from grade 9, rural area); student B (16-year-old female from grade 9, rural area); student C (15-year-old female from grade 9, rural area); student D (15-year-old female from grade 9, rural area); student E (15-year-old male from grade 9, urban area); participant F (15-year-old male from grade 9, urban area).

Although the small number of participants is a specific feature of qualitative research (Malterud et al., 2016), in the given study the recruitment of a larger number of participants was impeded by the specific situation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Assurance was given to both groups of participants that the data would be anonymized. For confidentiality, all information that could identify a person was carefully disguised or replaced so that participants were not identified. Ethical safeguards to ensure the welfare of study participants were applied throughout the study.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with four CCs according to the same interview schedule. Each interview consisted of two parts: the introductory part of the interview, focusing on the relevant sociodemographical features of research participants, and the main part of the interview related to the research topic.

An interview schedule, starting with a wider picture and then focusing on the specific details, was designed before the interviews (Howitt, 2010). Open-ended questions reflecting the research aim and the questions were produced based on a review of the appropriate literature. The main thematic blocks of the interview schedule were as follows: 1) attitude towards the system of course sets in the context of educational reform; 2) perception of risk and protective factors related to the choice of course sets, and 3) perception of possible support for the choice of course sets. Throughout the interviews, a

probing process was adopted, and the interviewer often requested more details to obtain rich accounts.

The interviews were held in the Zoom environment, which proved to be a viable tool for qualitative data collection (Archibald et al., 2019), and lasted 40 to 74 minutes. The atmosphere during the interviews was open, friendly, and motivating. All interviews were recorded on an audio recorder, provided by Zoom software, with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim using Express Scribe Transcription Software. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author of the article.

Focus group

A focus group was held with six students according to the prepared focus group schedule. The focus group was selected to clarify the views of students, as it is a less threatening method for many research participants, and this environment helps to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions, and thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The focus group interview schedule, starting with a wider context and gradually narrowing the focus on concrete details, was designed before the focus group interview. Open-ended questions that matched the aim and the research questions were created based on a review of the relevant literature and coordinated with the main thematic blocks of the individual interviews with the CCs. The themes of the focus group interview schedule were the following: 1) future (career) planning of students; 2) choice of course sets from the perspective of students; 3) attitude toward the selection of course sets; 4) perception of necessary assistance during the course set selection; 5) support of school CC in the choice of course sets. Also, as in the case with individual interviews, throughout the focus group interview, a probing process was used, and the moderator requested more details to obtain a more complete picture. Sociodemographic data were clarified after the focus group, through personal contact with each participant on WhatsApp.

The focus group was conducted in a Zoom environment with cameras and microphones turned on for maximum similarity to the live focus group; the focus group lasted for 49 minutes. The atmosphere during the focus group interview was open, friendly, and invigorating. The focus group discussion was recorded using the Zoom software audio recorder with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim by Express Scribe Transcription Software. The moderator and transcriber of the focus group interview was also the first author of the paper. This position allowed him to better understand and compare both sample groups.

Data analysis

The reasons for the selection of thematic analysis as the data analysis method for this research were as follows: at first, data from verbal interviews and focus groups tend to be at the root of thematic analysis (Joffe, 2011), also, it is an appropriate data analysis method for seeking to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across a data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis allows us to summarize and interpret various

data sets – in our case, data from interviews and focus groups – looking for differences and similarities within a data set (Creswell, 2009). The paradigmatic orientation of data analysis in a given exploratory study is tied to the constructivist stance that stresses social, cultural, and structural contexts that have an impact on the specific experience of the research participant and dealing with socially constructed meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since this study delves into the new area of research lacking established theories, it seemed natural to choose inductive thematic analysis, deriving themes from the data and providing a broader analysis of the whole body of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

The steps of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied to the collected data. This most popular framework for thematic analysis contains six stages: 1) familiarizing with the data, 2) generation of initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report. To enhance the trustworthiness of the research results, all three authors participated in data analysis: the first three stages of analysis were conducted in dialogue between the first two authors (PP and AP), while the third author (MKP) joined the analysis at the fourth stage, helping to review the themes and then define and name the themes. To provide answers to research questions, a combination of data from interviews and focus groups was performed, thus discerning the views of career counselors and students.

Findings and discussion

The results of the study will be reflected in three subchapters according to the research questions. The relevant themes and subthemes will be illustrated by appropriate quotes from the transcripts, translated in English by second author (AP). Each subchapter will show the responses from the CCs and students, emphasizing the similarities and differences of their answers and comparing the findings with previous scholarship. The chapter will conclude with the strengths and limitations of the study, also pointing to the practical implications and further research in a given field.

The challenges of the course set selection (CSS) perceived by the CCs and students

Research questions related to this topic produced five themes from the responses of CCs, namely 1) the impact of Covid-19 on CCs and students, 2) socioeconomic and demographic issues of CSS, 3) organizational risks launching the educational reform, 4) student-related problems of CSS, and 5) CC-related problems of CSS. From these five, the largest themes were student-related problems and organizational risks in starting the reform.

The impact of Covid-19 on CCs and students. The interviewees named several issues caused by the impact of the pandemic on educational reform and career guidance work – for instance, cancellation of regional events, job shadowing, open days, etc. Similar problems have been mentioned in recent literature on the impact of Covid-19 on career

counseling (Autin et al., 2020). Distance counselling hinders the building of trust; also, students overloaded with distance learning are not so eager to participate in career-related events. Participant B reported:

> The job shadowing, so important for the student to understand his/her direction, is cancelled, the on-site open days, when career counsellor was able to gather the group of students and take them to the workplace, are cancelled; we inform them about the distance events: but it often happens that student applies but later forgets to participate, or he/she is just too shy or some other circumstances. He/she is not ready in his/her holidays to get online in the middle of the day and actively participate in some event.

Socioeconomic and demographic issues of CSS. All interviewees mentioned that some municipalities or school principals cannot afford to hire CCs, or their workload is too small to do the job effectively. Also, the selection of the course sets is connected with labor market issues. The CCs believe that because of the small number of children in the region, the offer of course sets by secondary schools mirrors their self-interests, not so the strive for quality education. Participant A said: "It is the major problem for which we cannot blame the principal or career counsellor – it is our reality, we have a small number of children." Participant B added specific details:

> Considering the geographic arrangement of our towns, density of schools, birth rate, and all resources available, we can see a kind of struggle for survival: each school tries to make the best offer of course sets in line with the interests and abilities of their students, to stop the students from moving to another school.

The answers also show the concerns of the CCs about the availability of additional human resources, teaching resources, textbooks, technical equipment, and digital resources to launch the reform.

Organizational risks by launching the educational reform. This theme could be divided into two subthemes, namely uncertainty, launching the reform in general, and specific organizational issues of course sets. Usually, at the beginning of reforms, it is hard to predict the consequences and make clear plans relevant for the specific context. All involved stakeholders (administration, teachers, CCs) are looking for clarity. According to D: "[…] decisions need to be made very quickly in obscurity, and then we are looking for directions from the municipal education department, which in its turn is looking for the help from other departments, such a trial and error thing […]." These accounts match the previous findings on educational reforms (Harris & Jones, 2017), showing that more contextually appropriate approaches to the selection of educational policy are needed. The CCs also noticed the organization issues of course sets, like the difficult transition between schools and between sets. The schools have a hard time introducing a larger number of course sets, especially if a school does not specialize in some discipline/s. Furthermore, students, in line with the reform, should choose the course sets, not the schools per se, which is hard to implement.

Student-related problems of CSS. According to B: "It is a risk since 9th grade students are not yet quite mature, they are still children, and it is not so simple for them to get

to know what they will want to do in their future, their entire life, what their profession will be." CCs also mentioned the hard choice between higher education and profession, between professional school and secondary school, and between different sets of courses. The students need to be prepared for independent decision-making; they need to know about the future exams to be taken and the jobs in demand locally and globally. The students should think about the choices to be made well in advance; however, even in this case, the students might change their minds in the middle of secondary school, which would cause organizational problems. This echoes the idea of Krdök and Harman (2018) that career decision-making difficulties may be affected by problem-solving and decision-making skills of individuals.

CC-related problems of CSS. Participant B reported: "We cannot make the decision instead of the students, we cannot be the rulers of their destiny, since it depends on their learning achievements, their desires, character, goal orientation while choosing this set and studying these subject." Also, almost all the participants mentioned that counselling should not be forced on the student. Special schools also have their problems, as it is sometimes hard to convince the child that they should not choose a given profession: "I have a special child with a severe hearing impairment, but he wants to become a policeman. How to tell this child that it is hardly possible?" (A).

The students, participating in the focus group, had very high certainty and good knowledge regarding CSS and career choice; they would choose professions in engineering, architecture, dentistry, pediatrics, IT, or law enforcement. They were quite satisfied with the support from their parents, and they would all choose to study and look for work both in Latvia and abroad. Of all participants, five would choose a secondary school, while one student leans toward a professional school. Research data obtained from students and related to the challenge topic allowed producing three themes: possible changes in student goals and dreams, difficulties with the support of the CCs for CSS, and other CSS issues. The last theme, which consists of quite diverse topics, was reflected most extensively in the students' responses.

Possible changes in students' goals and dreams. Three students (E, D, A) expressed their concerns regarding CSS, mentioning that students could change their views on the selected set from grade 10 to 12. Student E explained his negation this way: "I think a 15 or 16-year-old person cannot choose their path of life and follow it until the end of life. I think that a person should lead his/her life up to 20 years of age without any sets and the definite choice should be made only at university level." However, a recent study shows that young people can change their career aspirations over time as they reconcile their interests and academic skills, but career aspirations in childhood and adolescence are remarkably stable and predict career attainment in adulthood (Hirschi, 2010).

Difficulties with the CCs support for the CSS. Student E emphasized that CCs do not have as much time to closely follow through and individually assess every student, and CCs cannot get into the minds of students to understand their needs. He accentuates: "If we talk about support, you can always ask parents, since parents know you better and can help you more than just a stranger." However, research findings emphasize the im-

portance of an individualized approach to career guidance in school (Everitt et al., 2008; Kamm et al., 2020).

Other issues of CSS. Five students, participating in a focus group, discussed different problems related to CSS. Student A complained: "If your selected set contains only half of the subjects you like, it's very sad." Student C suggested: "I choose the set of courses because I understand that, for example, I am not at all interested in biology, chemistry, while in mathematics and languages I succeed better." Students were also concerned that CSS is a huge commitment, and were convinced that if their school could not provide a suitable set, they should change the school.

Considering the fact that both students and CCs represent the same educational context, region, socioeconomic group, and they all have knowledge and experience on the research problem, gained in very similar cultural, geographical, institutional environment and period of time, notwithstanding the small number of research participants, we will try to make a comparison of the views of students and CCs, as this could provide a broader understanding of the phenomena under study and strengthen the validity of study (Carter et al., 2014). When comparing the responses from the CCs and students, it is evident and natural that the CCs suggested a much wider range of topics related to CSS risk factors. However, one theme matched in both groups of participants – this is the CCs' theme *Student-related problems* and students' theme *Possible changes in goals and dreams*. Both CCs and students emphasized that students in grade 9 are quite young and not mature enough to make important, independent choices that have an impact on their entire life. Also, both recognized that changing priorities and the need to change the course set can cause serious organizational problems. CCs indicated that career guidance cannot be forced on students and, in line with this, one of the students preferred the advice from their parents, not from the CC. Both students and counselors admitted the need for sufficient time resources for CCs to provide in-depth individual exploration and counseling. The students did not mention the impact of the pandemic, socioeconomic, or demographic issues on CSS.

The perceptions of CCs and students regarding the protective factors associated with the CSS

Research questions related to this topic produced two main themes from the answers of the CCs, namely protective factors for students and protective factors for the CCs. Protective factors for students were classified into five subthemes of support from 1) the school administration, 2) subject teachers, 3) CCs, 4) school team and parents, 5) town/country/EU. The most extensive subtheme was the support from CCs. The protective factors for CCs were also divided into five short and specific subthemes: 1) resources, 2) education, 3) exchange of experience, 4) collaboration, and 5) recognition.

Protective factors for students

Support from school administration. The researchers admitted that the school administration bears the main responsibility for the CSS of the students. School leaders can act as

a protective factor, providing adequate information, explanation of CSS, organizational issues, regulations, and examinations. In addition, they can participate in lessons and other career events. Participant C, who is also the principal of a small rural school, suggested: "The representatives of secondary schools should meet with me and we would discuss what we can do to ensure our students the best opportunities to continue their education at secondary school."

Support from the subject teachers. Elementary school teachers provide students with the basic knowledge necessary for higher levels of education and can develop students' abilities and motivate them to learn certain subjects in advance. Subject teachers can provide individual counseling, organize discussions, class lessons, and other forms of career education. Participant B stresses: "The advancing reform of the competence approach demands from the subject teachers the provision of career education during the lessons since in this way the children get to know their likes and dislikes: should I choose engineering or medicine, social relations, journalism, history, language or natural sciences?"

Support from the CCs. This subtheme can be divided into the description of functions performed and the methods of work used by the school CC. Participant B acknowledged the necessity for this profession: "Nowadays we have different methods for career counseling and professionals have mastered them, they have the right knowledge in this field. We need this person from outside… making it easier for the student, as the student can discuss the matter and then decide on his/her own." All research participants noted that CCs can do the things that subject teachers cannot do; CCs are respected specialists, who can be involved in the design of course sets and can adapt more rapidly to the need for the delivery of relevant information to the students. Also, the CCs have already adjusted to distance activities and learning.

The interviewees named the following methods that could be used to support students in CSS. Already in elementary school, students could be informed about the selection of school and course sets; after that, individual assessments of abilities and personality type and individual counseling can be conducted as early as possible, and then individual counseling in secondary school would be of great help. The next group of methods focuses on events of career education like meetings of elementary students with secondary school students, graduates of a given elementary school, workshops, watching video materials, visits to workplaces together with meetings and discussions with professionals, job shadowing, etc. Furthermore, according to D, "career counselors should regularly meet and talk to students who have already selected these sets: why did they choose these sets, are they satisfied with their choice, are there any factors that could make them change their mind?"

Support from the school team and parents. This subtheme is illuminated in the answer from C: "In our school all subject teachers, from kindergarten to grade 9, educational psychologist, special education teacher, administration, we all are doing the necessary work to help children understand which direction they could choose, since in these matters teamwork is especially important." Schools can organize teamwork to design course

sets or launch the open days and career events. Schools can also invite parents to tell about their professions and involve parents in career guidance in general, as suggested by the latest research (Oomen, 2018).

Support from the town/country/EU. This is an important form of support, as the municipality could offer grants for students choosing certain professions in demand, hire more CCs with larger workloads, and manage the career services in town. The Ministry of Education and Science is responsible for the support on the national level as well as for the accreditation of schools, while EU projects can serve as a good starting point for further education of CCs and development of career education in schools.

Protective factors for CCs

The research participants named five groups of protective factors, helping them to provide effective services, especially those related to CSS. The first group focuses on resources such as a sufficient amount of workload and time not only for group events but also for individual counseling. The second group of factors describes the various educational events like self-education, courses, workshops, supervision, methodical support, etc. The next group relates to the exchange of experience: participants are told of visits abroad, EU projects, and the Association of Career Counselors. The other group of factors explains the necessity for collaboration – with the school team (subject teachers, administration, special teacher, school psychologist, social work teacher, students, parents, etc.) and between the CCs themselves. The last factor is recognition and support from the school administration and the Ministry of Education and Science.

Research questions related to the topic of protective factors produced two themes from the answers of students: 1) support from CCs for CSS, 2) organization and benefits of course sets. From these two themes, the support from CCs was the theme most often encountered in students' answers.

Support from CCs for CSS. Students showed the proper understanding of the functions performed by the CCs, talking about the possible help in self-exploration, investigation of interests, abilities, and individual counselling. They stressed that CCs should give you direction, not make the decisions for you, and that it is easier to speak with the less familiar person (A, B, C, D). Student B reported: "I think that initially you should take some time to think things over and then, if you are only in a deadlock, you should visit a career counselor." Four participants in the focus group mentioned activities that they have personally participated in, such as individual counseling, clarification of plans, talking about interests, administration of tests (D, B, E, A). One student admitted: "We talked about my interests, what I love, I imagined what I will be in 10–15 years, leading me to different conclusions" (A). In general, three students gave a very positive evaluation of the CCs work on CSS (B, A, D).

Organization and benefits of course sets. Students emphasized that course sets are in line with their interests and needs. The students expressed a positive attitude towards the availability of course sets, admitting that they had experienced the great choice of course sets. However, several students observed that in many schools these course sets are sim-

ilar. The students were quite knowledgeable about their opportunities and admitted that at least two best sets can be found in each school (A, B, E).

Benefits of course sets. The majority of students acknowledged the readiness to change the school for better course sets and stressed other benefits, such as the opportunity to prepare for higher education and to enroll in state-funded study places (A, B, E, D). The course sets boost the interest in the chosen profession, one can learn necessary subjects, and it is easier to learn if you like the subjects. Student B explained: "If, for instance, you choose the biological set, you could better prepare yourself for the exams necessary for medicine, chemistry, biology, and, if you succeed well, you can get the state-funded study place, this could help in the future."

Again, the CCs covered a wider range of topics related to protective factors in the situation of CSS. Although the CCs stressed the support of the whole school team, the students mentioned only the support of the CCs. Both students and CCs recognized the necessity of CC in school and, in general, were like-minded in terms of the functions and methods of CCs. Students and CCs similarly thought that CCs can only show the right direction, not make decisions instead of the student. Students mostly indicated the positive aspects and benefits of the set of courses based on their individual experience, while the CCs provided a much wider view, showing the need for multidimensional resources to deal with the organizational and personal issues of CSS. The students did not mention the protective factors necessary for CCs.

Overall, the answers related to the functions of CCs both from the perspective of CCs and students coincided with the description of the work reflected in the literature (Burceva, 2020b; Counseling directory, 2021), and it seems that at least the interviewed CCs have enough competencies to deal with the current challenges of educational reform in Latvia. It appeared that students from the research sample, similarly to their American peers (Smith et al., 2006, 2008), are quite ready and eager to make a pioneering transition to other towns and schools, not expecting any social or well-being issues. However, the CCs, in general, are not so optimistic and speak about the substantial amount of resources necessary for proper transition, matching the suggestions from other studies (Anderson et al., 2000). As to the gender differences, opposite to the previous study (Anderson et al., 2000), in our small sample both girls and boys expressed their enthusiasm about the transition.

Going back to the three conditions for vocational choice suggested by Crites (1969), the results of this qualitative study show the prevalence of these conditions in the CSS: students have the choices (although rather limited for some), they are eager to choose, and they are free to choose, since the parents and CCs are not forcing their decisions.

Differences in the perception of risk and protective factors in urban and rural schools

The research questions related to this topic produced two main themes from the responses of CCs, namely the specifics of CSS in urban schools and the specifics of CSS in rural schools.

Specifics of CSS in urban schools. All research participants admitted that bigger cities provide wider educational opportunities. In addition, living in a city, one can choose similar course sets in several schools, students can be more mobile and reach other schools in the city, and the schools in larger cities have a larger number of course sets to choose from.

Specifics of CSS in rural schools. According to A, who is also a teacher in a rural school, "In the rural community, it is a large problem: those students who live near Daugavpils [second largest city in Latvia – authors' note], they can be mobile, for example, Naujene, Krauja, Lociki, no problems, we have a good bus service, but, for example, the commute from Špoģi (small parish about 30 km from Daugavpils – authors' note] […]." All participants stress problems associated with mobility: because of the socioeconomic situation, students are not always able to pay for travel and accommodation in the city, especially those living farther away from the cities. Due to the economic and demographic situation, rural schools have a small number of course sets, mostly a minimal number of sets. Also, participant B suggested that since the existence of the secondary school is the issue of survival of the rural community, CCs in rural schools have a dilemma: if they will suggest better course sets, students will move, and rural schools will cease to exist.

The students also mentioned the better opportunities for CSS in the bigger cities (A, E) as well. Student E acknowledged: "In Riga [capital of Latvia – authors' note] and Daugavpils the situation with the course sets is good, but in Krāslava [a small town in the Latgale region – authors' note] the situation is quite sad."

Therefore, it seems that the career path of rural students in the Latgale region depends mainly on their geographical situation and individual socioeconomic status: exactly as in other studies, there are students with the opportunity to leave their residential area for better education and those who must remain in smaller towns (Farrugia, 2014; Forsey, 2015). Additionally, research findings fully support the idea proposed in the literature that CCs in rural schools should be aware of how the local socioeconomic and educational situation influences the experience of rural youth (Chen & Doherty, 2021; Pillay, 2021). Although they did not mention it openly, interviewed CCs are trying to follow the paradigm shift of the present time, stressing the role of context, culture, and issues of inequity in their work (Perry, 2010).

To place the findings of this study in a broader theoretical and methodological context, it should be stressed that the novelty of this study is based on a first-time description of the risk and protective factors regarding CSS during the transfer from primary to secondary education, viewed from the complementary perspectives of CCs and students. Therefore, this small exploratory study, at least in the context of Baltic countries, could lay the ground and show the range of directions worth further exploration, especially in regions suffering from an urban-rural divide in the field of education (Newbold & Brown, 2015; Wang, 2012) in times of crisis such as Covid-19 and simultaneous educational reforms. The methodological novelty and significance of the study is mainly based on the integration of data triangulation with methodological triangulation, using

two groups of participants, approaching the same problem from different points of view. Such triangulation is especially useful in exploring practical issues, and the data obtained later can be used to build different interventions and support programs (Gloster & Karekla, 2020; Podolak et al., 2017).

Strengths and limitations

Speaking about the strengths of this research, we should note the heterogeneous composition of the interview sample, including experts with different work experience, places of living, status and position, thus improving the transferability of the results. Another strength is the data, methodological, and researcher triangulation mentioned above. Several limitations could have affected the findings of this qualitative study. First, the sample size was limited to four participants for interviews and six participants for the focus group. Second, the interviews and focus groups were conducted by the CC, opening the possibility of professional biases and assumptions. Third, the small number of males in the study, showing the real gender composition in the profession of CC, could build the potential for gender bias. Fourth, only one of the experts lives in the rural community, thus shifting the balance of the CCs' sample towards the urban representation. Additionally, it was not always possible to pinpoint whether the participant spoke about their personal experience or views (especially in focus group), as in the case of students analyzing opportunities from rural and urban schools. Finally, the composition of the focus group shows rather motivated and ambitious students, quite certain about their CSS. It would be advantageous to explore the views of not as motivated and uncertain students.

Further research and practical implications

The results of this study, complemented with the results of potential quantitative research, would assist in designing the multidimensional model of risk and protective factors, which has an impact on CSS in secondary school. In addition, this study would serve as a starting point for the development of specific guidelines for CCs to support students in making responsible CSS and recommendations for elementary school students in Latvia (particularly in the Latgale region of Latvia), related to responsible and independent CSS according to one's interests, abilities and personality. Furthermore, the results of this study would provide empirical support for more efficient management of the Competence Approach to the Curriculum (School 2030).

Conclusions

In conclusion, this inquiry has presented a detailed description of the perspectives of CCs and students on the risk and protective factors choosing the course sets in secondary education in the Latgale region of Latvia. The aim of the study was reached, and answers to the research questions were obtained, indicating both the commonalities and diverse views of the CCs and students on the given topic. Taking into account the specifics of qualitative research, this study could provide valuable information to teachers, CCs,

education decision-makers, and other practitioners currently working in similar locations and socioeconomic contexts (at least in the Baltic countries).

The challenges of the CSS named by the CCs most often were student-related problems and organizational risks, while the impact of Covid-19, socioeconomic and demographic issues, as well as CC-related problems were noticed as hindering factors. Students acknowledged the different logistic and organizational difficulties of CSS and observed some problems with the support of CSS. Although the CCs presented a much wider perspective on the issue, in several important aspects their views coincided with the students' perception (e.g., immaturity of the ninth graders to make important life-changing decisions, organizational matters).

The analysis of the perceptions of CCs regarding the protective factors associated with CSS revealed that, besides their engagement, explained in a detail, CCs observe the large scope of other protective factors, like support from administration, subject teachers, school team, parents, town/country/EU. They also mentioned the multidimensional support needed for their work to provide proper assistance in CSS, namely the different resources, education, exchange of experience, collaboration with stakeholders and within the profession, and recognition from outside. The students endorsed the support of the CCs as the main protective factor, avoiding naming other factors (except for the parents). They emphasized the benefits and organizational peculiarities that support their choice. Both studied groups have acknowledged the importance and supportive functions of CCs for CSS.

Both CCs and students recognize the disadvantages of rural school students regarding CSS – if they stay in their rural schools, they have less of a choice than their urban peers; however, mobility is also a questionable option for many students because of logistic or socioeconomic issues. In general, the findings of this study coincide with previous studies, showing the significant impact of socioeconomic and cultural context on the work of school CCs and the educational opportunities of students. However, school CCs can be viewed as an important asset for Latvian society to manage and relieve the challenges of educational reform and inequalities in education and career management caused by socioeconomic disparities.

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