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**Secondary School Students' Experiences With Engaging in Self-
Definition Tasks as Part of their Career Development**

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Abstract

During secondary education, students have to choose what to do after graduation. Many feel pressured to choose something that fits the image of their current and future identities and experience stress and uncertainty in making a decision. The present study aims to connect secondary educational career counselling to Funds of Identity research (FoI). FoI scholarship focuses on acknowledging and developing students' identity through self-definition tasks (SDT): e.g., creative assignments such as drawn self-portraits used to gain insights into someone's identity and foster its development. To advance insights into how FoI research can contribute to the support of adolescents' career development, it was studied how students in different stages of their career development experience engaging in SDTs as part of their career orientation. Eleven students from one teacher were interviewed. It was found that students who already had some idea of their future career plans experience the SDT as more enjoyable, less complicated and more valuable when it comes to the orientation of possible career paths than those who had no idea yet. However, most students reported preferring an SDT as part of a career counselling conversation instead of having no activity to prepare such a conversation.

Keywords: Funds of Identity, adolescents, career development, secondary education, study choice

Secondary School Students' Experiences With Engaging in Self-Definition Tasks as Part of Their Career Development

During adolescence, young adults find out whom they want to spend time with, discover personal interests and make important life choices (Spano, 2004). One of these choices regards the study programmes they want to enrol in after graduating from secondary education. In previous centuries, the job market was not as flexible and diverse as it is now, and most people followed the professional examples of their family members (Giddens, 1991). In contrast to traditional life, the self is a definite given that is based on gender, social status, age, and ethnicity to a lesser extent. Generally, we now have the opportunity to make our own choices; for example, we can make choices about our career paths (Giddens, 1991). Researchers have suggested that choosing a study programme is part of someone's identity development and that students see their study choices to define themselves (Holmegaard et al., 2012). For some adolescents, the ability to follow and create their career paths is liberating and exciting, but most experience stress and uncertainty (Giddens, 1991; Holmegaard et al., 2012; Smeters, 2018). The latter group feels pressured to choose something that fits their image of whom they want to become as a person and fear that they might make the wrong decision (Holmegaard et al., 2012). They experience stress because they do not know yet what career path suits them or whether they would like to be enrolled in a specific study programme. Smeters (2018) found that these students first need to obtain more insights into these matters before choosing a study programme.

To decide what career paths may suit them, adolescents need to gain further insights into their identity (Holmegaard et al., 2012). Research about career development during secondary education often concerns how career choices are made or how peers or parents influence this process. Some career-related theories are connected to identity, but it seems that there is limited research on specific tasks and activities that supports identity exploration and

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development that might be valuable for finding a suitable career path. Therefore, the present paper explores how Funds of Identity (FoI) research can help foster this process. FoI scholarship focuses on acknowledging and developing students' identities. Esteban-Guitart (2012) defined FoI as “a set of resources or box of tools (...) they are essential for constructing one's identity and for defining and presenting oneself” (p. 177). These tools might be objects or activities that define who we are. FoI researchers use self-definition tasks (SDTs) like, for example, painting self-portraits, creating written stories about one's life, and engaging in other arts-based activities to detect students' FoI outside the school context (Hogg & Volman, 2020). Insights into the connection between FoI and theories about career development during secondary education might be valuable for supporting students in choosing a study programme that fits the image of whom they want to become and decreasing the amount of stress they experience.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative Career Guidance

According to some career-counselling researchers, the counsellor's focus is too often devoted to career dimensions (Brott, 2001, 2004; Cochran, 1997). Career theorist Cochran (1997) was one of the first researchers to introduce narrative career counselling. The narrative approach understands career counselling in relation to meaning-making and identity development (Brott, 2001; Cochran, 1997). According to Brott (2001) and Cochran (1997), thoughts about future career plans are constructed through someone's identity and past and present life experiences. To make career plans, one must uncover these personal narratives. Thus, career decisions are viewed holistically and as a part of someone's whole life according to this approach.

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As researchers have suggested, secondary educational students prefer to control their study choice processes, and they fear that teachers influence this too much (Holmegaard et al., 2012; Thomas & Gibbons, 2009). According to Thomas and Gibbons (2009), the narrative approach might support adolescents in their career orientation because it “allows adolescents to explore family reflections, recognise their emotions, and, because they are the authors of their stories, express their story from their egocentric viewpoint and evaluate that viewpoint in comparison to where they would like to be” (p. 225). When using the narrative approach, the student is the expert of their own life (Bujold, 2004) and acts as the main character and the author of their own career story (Christensen & Johnston, 2003). The teacher’s role resembles that of an editor or facilitator: they support students in the process of sense-making (Sharf, 2006).

Life-span, Life-Space Theory on Career Development

The overall agreement about career development theories is that the career development process differs according to each person (Lewis & Stipanovic, 2008). To varying degrees, factors like culture, family, geography, gender, socioeconomic status, personal interests, ethnicity, and peers influence someone's career development (Gati et al., 2010; Lewis & Stipanovic, 2008; Smitina, 2010). The life-span, life-space theory considers many of these factors and multiple cultural environments in which career development occurs, such as schools, homes, and communities (Herr, 1997; Super, 1984, 1990).

Super’s (1984) life-span, life-space theory recognizes that career development begins years before the start of someone’s actual career. Career development consists of five stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. The growth and exploration stages are especially relevant to this study because they are generally related to childhood and adolescence (Herr, 1997). The growth stage marks the starting point of vocational identity development (Lewis & Stipanovic, 2008). Children and young adolescents

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from the ages of 4 to 13 (Stead & Schultheiss, 2003) are concerned with developing their career-relevant self-concepts, which Super (1984) described as the parts of a person's identity that they value as vocationally relevant. Through learning, playing, and fantasising in several environments, children and young adolescents gain insight into their interests and abilities (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008). According to Super (1990), the growth stage prepares adolescents for the exploration stage, which generally affects adolescents from ages 14 to 24. Previously constructed self-understandings are further developed; adolescents narrow down their career desires and options and turn general interests into career choices (Super, 1990). According to Lewis and Stipanovic (2008), the exploration stage is "critical to students developing a sense of vocational identity and an overall sense of self" (p. 47). The establishment stage follows the exploration stage. During the establishment stage, people commit to a career and establish a secure place in an organization (Super, 1984, 1990).

Connecting Funds of Identity to Career Development Theories

The narrative approaches to study choice counselling and Super's life-span, life-space theory both concern identity exploration and development during career development and counselling. They highlight significant influences such as environment, culture, and family. In addition to including theories that consider the importance of a holistic view of identity in career development, FoI research can provide insights into their approaches to identity and explain how study choice counsellors might implement activities that foster identity exploration and development.

The foundation of FoI scholarship lies in sociocultural perspectives on identity development. According to such perspectives, identity comprises someone's self-understanding, which is multidimensional and consists of dimensions such as a vocational identity, a learner identity, and identity as a friend (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Verhoeven et al.,

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2018). Identity is constructed through the interaction of an individual and the world in which the individual lives and informed by the culture, social interactions, and personal experiences of this person (Hogg & Volman, 2020; Vågan, 2011). People tend to conform to different social positions that are prevalent in their cultural surroundings, such as being a good learner, partner, or friend (Verhoeven et al., 2018). In doing so, people learn how to behave and think based on locally available cultural resources such as tools and ideologies (Vågan, 2011). Cultural norms and values influence people's actions and the goals that they set in life (Holland et al., 2001; Verhoeven et al., 2018). It depends, for example, to a large extent on someone's cultural background how they think about career-related topics.

The FoI concept enriches and sometimes critiques the prior Funds of Knowledge (FoK) theory (Hogg & Volman, 2020; Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011). Moll et al. (1992) referred to FoK as the knowledge, skills, and information a person has acquired through experiences in a household or community. FoK scholarship is generally concerned with organising culturally responsive education and reducing negative stereotyping by connecting students' FoK to curricula (Hogg & Volman, 2020; Jovés et al., 2015). However, even though these FoK can be informative, some students do not acknowledge them as part of their actual identity; they do not necessarily identify with all their FoK. When people use their FoK to define themselves actively, FoK become FoI (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2017). FoI scholarship emphasises the specific skills, knowledge, personal interests and experiences of an individual, which do not necessarily emerge from someone's community or household (Jovés et al., 2015; Schachter, 2005).

When FoI is implemented into teaching, education might become more personally meaningful because it focuses on individual students who have unique identities and traits rather than viewing them as community representatives (Hogg & Volman, 2020). Perceiving students as individuals with their own identities is essential for supporting them in their career

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development as they all have different needs regarding career counselling. Because many career theorists consider several factors in someone's life as crucial to their career development, learning more about a student's FoI to support them in making career-related choices can be valuable.

Self-Definition Tasks as Part of Career Development and Counselling

In many Dutch secondary schools, career guidance consists of several instruments and activities, including personal development plans and portfolios (Mittendorff et al., 2008). According to Mittendorff et al. (2008), personal development plans aim to answer questions like 'What do I want in my future career?' and 'What do I need to do to reach my goals?' Portfolios are used to collect different kinds of task performances and illustrate the process of career orientation (Larkin et al., 2002).

The narrative approach emphasises not only career choices but the student's whole life story (Brott, 2001; Cochran, 1997). To consider this holistic perspective, counsellors might implement SDTs into their counselling. Over the last few years, several SDTs have been developed by researchers and educational experts to define and detect people's FoI (e.g., Charteris et al., 2018; Poole, 2017; Subero et al., 2017). SDTs are often art-based tasks like drawing self-portraits, creating written stories about someone's life, or filling a shoebox filled with important self-defining objects (Hogg & Volman, 2020). SDTs help people think about themselves by defining important aspects of their lives, such as people, institutions, interests, or activities (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011). By making SDTs, students consider all the different subjects that they value as part of their identity. Because SDTs make it possible to visualize and uncover someone's personal narrative, they might be valuable in narrative study choice counselling.

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The life-span, life-space theory suggests that people move through several career development stages in which identity exploration and development should occur (Herr, 1997; Super, 1984, 1990). The theory emphasises the need of career guidance at an early stage, but there is few research on how guidance in the early stages could look like. SDTs might help growth-stage students define essential aspects of their lives, which could aid them in developing career-relevant self-concepts. Students in the explorational stage might be supported by exploring possible future identities and career options. Generally in FoI scholarship, students make one SDT about their current identity or life. Poole's (2017) study, however, focussed on exploring new identities by creating multiple avatars, which allowed students to reflect upon several possible identities that they created. This approach might be valuable for supporting students as making multiple avatars allows them to explore future identities and career options. Students envision themselves when they are in the establishment stage and can reflect upon career options before bringing these into practice.

Present Research

Generally, this study aims to better understand the connection between FoI, life-span theory, and narrative study choice counselling. More specifically, this study focuses on students' experiences with engaging in SDTs as part of their career development. Because growth-stage students are concerned with understanding their interests and abilities and exploration-stage students are exploring possible career options, these groups may have different experiences regarding the use of SDTs. Therefore, one must ask the following research question: 'How do secondary school students experience engaging in self-definition tasks to reflect upon their identity and career development, and what differences can be found between students in the growth stage and students in the explorational stage?'

Methods

Research Context

This research was conducted in a public secondary school near a big city in the Netherlands. The school consists of 710 students and 471 employees from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Most students live in wealthy neighbourhoods with working parents, but some are from a lower socioeconomic status and live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Former assignments related to the students' career development have mainly focussed on the orientation of specific study programmes, as well as students' interests and abilities. Students made, for example, a study choice test and the school hosted a jobs fair in which students received detailed information on specific careers. Students have not, however, participated in creative identity tasks in which they reflect on their whole life and identity.

During a tutoring class session, students in their graduation year completed an SDT to reflect on themselves and their career development. They received a piece of paper and had to write or draw who they are now on one half of the paper and write or draw the image of themselves in ten years on the other half. This allowed students in both the exploration stage and growth stage to consider who they currently are and who they will be in the establishment stage. As demonstrated by Poole's (2017) research about avatars, students may envision completely new or partially new identities when they make a present-and-future SDT. Additionally, conducting a present-and-future SDT suits the narrative approach since it emphasises the importance of combining past, present, and future life experiences. Because different factors in a student's life might be important in their career development, they could include several aspects of their lives, such as significant people, activities, and institutions (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011).

Research Design

A comparative interview study that was qualitative and exploratory in nature was conducted with eleven students taught by one teacher. When investigating a research question

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using a comparative interview study, it is possible to obtain in-depth information on a subject (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and study a research problem's real-world context (Starman, 2013). It might also be helpful in conceptualization and theory development (Boeije, 2002). This study aimed to uncover more in-depth information on students' experiences and attitudes towards their career development and SDTs and explored differences in these experiences between students in the explorational stage and students in the growth stage. As stated previously, the connection between SDTs and career development has not yet been investigated. Because of all these reasons, a comparative interview study seemed to be the most suitable research method.

Interviews were performed to explore how students experienced engaging in SDTs. By doing interviews, a researcher gets detailed insights into a person's life and way of thinking and conversations can be adjusted to each situation (Lewis & Ormston, 2013). A semi-structured interview guide with several topics was used during this research (see Appendix A). The purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews is to dive deeper into essential topics following the theoretical framework. Additionally, unforeseen but relevant topics can be discussed (Segal et al., 2006). During the interviews, a combination of open-ended and closed questions was used. Closed questions sometimes served as gateways to open-ended probing (Adams, 2015).

Participants

The researcher approached several secondary education teachers through LinkedIn. As a result, one teacher agreed to participate with her tenth-grade class in lower general secondary education (vmbo-t). This study investigated tenth-grade students from the age of 15 or 16 because they are generally more concerned with deciding what to do after graduation than students in their initial secondary educational years. Lower general secondary students were investigated because in the Netherlands, this is the largest group (Onderwijsinspectie,

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2019). With two educational levels above and two levels below, this educational level is also right in the middle. Additionally, students in lower general secondary education are relatively young when they graduate from secondary education.

A student's career development stage might affect how they experience engaging in SDTs. Therefore, obtaining insights into different stages was relevant and desirable. When looking at Super's stages of career development, one will find that students aged 15 or 16 are generally in the growth stage or the exploration stage. Of the 11 participating students, six were in the exploration stage and five were in the growth stage. Students in the exploration stage had already decided what profession they wanted to enter or had concrete options for study programmes. Some of them had thoroughly planned out their futures, while others had a more general idea about what career they wanted. The students in the growth stage had little or no idea about their future career. At the time of the assignment, one boy decided to pursue a higher secondary educational level before leaving secondary school. The other growth stage students had not decided what to do after graduation. Such a diverse sample allowed the researcher to investigate differences between students from different career development stages. Differences among the participants that were derived from their interviews can be found in Appendix B1.

Collecting Data: Interviews

During the interviews, the students explained their SDTs and how they experienced engaging in the task. Because this study aimed to examine the differences between students in the growth stage and the exploration stage, the conversations began with questions about their career decision-making progress. The interviews also comprised questions about what the students had already done to choose a study programme and how they had experienced this process so far. This was asked because understanding this process might explain why students perceive specific experiences regarding SDTs. Questions such as the following were asked:

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“What have you done already to decide what you want to do after graduation?” During the main part of the interviews, the SDTs and the students’ experiences with them were discussed. Questions such as the following were asked: “How did you experience thinking about yourself in this manner?” and “Which of the two SDTs did you experience as most difficult? Can you explain why?” The whole list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Procedure

In line with the faculty’s ethical requirements, only students who decided to fill out an informed consent form and had their parents do so too (in case they were younger than 16) participated in this study. Because this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted over Teams. The researcher sat in a closed room so that the participants could not hear background noises. The researcher also made sure that the participants could see her face clearly by sitting in the light rather than behind it.

To decrease the risk of misconceptions, the interviews were audio-taped using a mobile phone and were later transcribed. The audiotapes were saved on a hard disk, and after they were transcribed, they were deleted from the computer. The transcriptions were carefully archived in a safe environment for research data at Utrecht University. Personal information in the transcriptions was anonymised by changing the names of the participants.

Data Analysis

This research used a qualitative, conventional approach to content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), this type of analysis is suitable for phenomena that have not been explored, theorised, or researched before. Even though prior research exists on SDTs and career development concepts, there is no literature on both together. Therefore, results about the experiences concerning engaging in the SDTs followed from inductive analysis,

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which allowed the researcher to derive unexpected themes and codes that were driven by the actual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Coding was conducted using MaxQDA, which allowed the researcher to easily place statements under correct codes. Following the conventional approach, the researcher read the transcriptions carefully and derived the data in codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Simultaneously, the researcher made notes about specific thoughts. By repeating this process, the researcher developed the initial code system. The codes were sorted into meaningful clusters during the axial coding to define concepts with indicators and characteristics (Boeije, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Because this study took a comparative interview approach, the students were compared to one another. During the axial coding, students from the same group were compared. According to Boeije (2002), comparison within groups helps develop the subjects' conceptualizations further. This within-group comparison is also valuable for discovering possible code combinations, which can help produce categories (Boeije, 2002). This process resulted in a code tree that explained relevant categories and themes. A selective analysis was conducted by exploring possible patterns, connecting and comparing several categories to one another (Boeije, 2009), and comparing exploration and growth stage students.

The first theme derived from the coding process was experiences regarding the task application. The sub-themes covered the different ways students could express themselves, the task setting and the task implementation. The second theme was task enjoyment, and the underlying codes were joyful, average and stupid. Task difficulty was the third theme and had the following open codes: a) difficulty thinking about oneself, b) difficulty completing the current SDT, c) easily completing the current SDT and d) difficulty completing the future SDT. The final theme concerned the perceived value of engaging in the task. Amongst others, the codes that were classified under this theme were: a) doubts about value, b) the value of

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writing thoughts down and c) thoughts on existing future ideas. Figure 1 provides examples of how open codes were clustered into axial codes and selective codes.

Figure 1

Example of the coding-process.

Interview quotes	Open Code	Axial Code	Selective Code
“Difficult, especially the current one (...) I do not know what I am good at and what I like” (Student H).	Difficult to make the current SDT	Task-difficulty	Self-definition task; experiences
“When I started writing the current part, it worked well. I finished that quickly” (Student B).	Easy to make the current SDT		

Additionally, this study used deductive analysis to learn more about students’ career development progress. Codes included considered career choices and the influence of family, friends, and school activities concerning these choices. Insights into these matters illuminated how students experience certain parts of SDTs and helped to select students as being in the growth stage or exploration stage. Using existing theory to identify important concepts possibly increased the face validity and, therefore, the chance of measuring what one is seeking to measure (Potter & Levine- Donnerstein, 1999).

Quality Assurance

An external researcher evaluated the audit trail to assure the reliability and validity of this research (de Kleijn & van Leeuwen, 2018). This external researcher was familiar with the study's theory and could therefore provide valuable contributions and feedback concerning the research process and content. Additionally, the external researcher was involved during the data analysis and helped with dividing the codes into meaningful themes.

A pilot interview with a tenth-grade lower general secondary student was conducted to increase the validity of the interview questions (Kistin & Silverstein, 2015), test whether the interview questions were complete, valuable, and understandable (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), and allowed the researcher to review the ethics and usefulness of the research process (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). The participant asked permission to write instead of draw, which she was allowed to, as expressing herself accurately was important. Writing was, therefore, also allowed during the official study. Besides that, no changes regarding the clarity of the task were needed. Nevertheless, abstract and challenging interview questions such as "What are the differences between your current SDT and future SDT?" were deleted. Additionally, the focus during the official interviews was on clear topics concerning task-related experiences, instead of the possible choices for future study programmes and careers. Amongst others, the following questions were added: "How did you experience this task when surrounded by other students?" and "Can you explain why you chose to write instead of draw?"

Results

Data analysis identified the following four observations of students' experiences when engaging in SDTs as part of their career development:

1. application of the task,

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2. enjoyment in doing the task,
3. level of task difficulty, and
4. perception of the task's value.

Students differed in their opinions on task application, but the stage of career development did not seem to be related to these differences. The experiences regarding task enjoyment, difficulty and value did seem to be connected and their level of importance differed according to their career development stage. The findings, including the differences, are displayed by observed experience and in random order.

Application of the Task

Ways of Expressing

During the interviews, students mentioned experiences regarding the different ways they could express themselves. All students used (mostly) words to perform the task, as they found it more pleasant to write instead of draw. Seven students accounted for this choice by stating they were not creative or were bad at drawing. Four students reported that they could better express themselves in words. Student B stated, "Writing works better for me because I can show more what I want to do, and I'm not good at drawing". Other students chose to write due to time pressure. One student even reported that it would have been better if the task was online because he hated drawing and writing with a pencil.

While some students only made a black-and-white short list of words that described their identity, others combined words with colourful visuals and cues. The latter group mentioned that using colours and taking the time to make the SDTs look nice makes them think more deeply and carefully about who they are and how they envision their future.

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Task Setting

The interviews generated a wide range of statements about the task setting. Some students liked doing the task in class, while others prefer doing it at home. Figure 2 outlines the students' reasons for their preference to do the task at home or in school. A few students expressed no preference, while others wanted to start the task in class and finish it at home. Three students reported that they would have performed otherwise if they made the task (partly) at home. Student H explained,

I think I would have drawn something and maybe used some more colours, so I could make it coherent for myself, and I could take more time to think about where I see myself in 10 years. And I could use better and more words to express what I would do [in the future].

Figure 2.*Students' reasons for their preference regarding the task setting*

Performing the task in class	Quote
Asking classmates for advice	"They [friends] probably know me better than I know myself" (Student C).
Being inspired by their classmates' plans	"Because you talk about it with your classmates like 'what are you planning to do?' and 'where do you stand?' Not to copycat, but because you are interested in where the rest will be" (Student D).
Too much distraction at home	"If there were no teachers, I would get distracted (...) I would use my phone and stuff" (Student G).
Performing the task at home	Quote

Taking the time needed	“I probably would have taken more time and made a bigger effort on the task (...) I would make it more extensive, and think about it more deeply” (Student H).
Performing the task when one is inspired	“I would really sit down for it the moment when I feel inspired and know what I wanted to write down” (Student I).
No distraction from classmates	“In class, you get distracted really quickly, so it is not the most ideal setting for such a task” (Student I).
Ensuring privacy	“I think this task is more of a personal matter. I know my family and friends will always support me in my choices, but it would feel better if I did it [the assignment] on my own” (Student I).

Task Implementation

Students envisioned how they would experience the SDTs as part of a career counselling conversation. One student stated that he had no idea about his possible experiences of implementing an SDT in a career counselling conversation because he never had such a talk with a teacher. Other students reported that the assignment can enrich career counselling conversations with teachers. They affirmed that SDTs can help them become fully and thoroughly prepared as they can already think about essential subjects beforehand, resulting in more meaningful conversations. Student A explained, “Because then I have already thought about my ideas, and we can dive into them further instead of having to think about it at that specific moment”. Student A also mentioned that talking about her SDTs and career options during the interview helped her organise her thoughts.

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Student C concurred that talking to a tutor about career development could be frightening if there was no such assignment to prepare him for it.

I: Do you think something like this [the task] could help initiate such a conversation with a tutor?

S: Yes!

I: Why do you think so?

S: Then I would have some ideas about what to tell and stuff.

I: And how would a normal tutor conversation be without such an assignment?

S: Then I would probably have nothing to say. I would not know how to answer either. Also, I would probably just be nervous.

I: Why would you be nervous?

S: Because I do not know about what it [the conversation] will be, and then some questions come up that I don't expect and stuff.

The above interview fragments showed the student's desire to be in control of the situation. Students, in general, want to be prepared for a career counselling conversation; they want to know and mainly define what the conversation will be about rather than having the teacher completely decide on the content of the conversation.

Enjoyment of the Task

For the broad question "How did you experience the task?", most students in the exploration stage affirmed that they liked making the SDTs because it was the first time they performed such a task, and they liked to think carefully about themselves and their future. Student B reported, "I liked it. It was something different from what we normally do in such a way that you think, 'what do I want to do in the future?'" Only Student C did not

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explicitly stated that he enjoyed the task, saying, “I do not really have an opinion about it. Just a normal assignment like any schoolwork and all”. In general, Student C did not participate in any activity that could support him in his career development, and this possibly explains why he did not explicitly like the SDTs.

Students in the growth stage enjoyed the assignment to a lesser extent than those in the exploration stage. When asked “How did you experience the task?”, student in growth stage replied less often that they enjoyed doing the task. Two students kind of liked the task. Student I stated, “I do not know if it helped me, but the task in itself was alright”. Student G had a generally negative attitude towards school and career orientation, and he clearly stated that he hated doing the task, “I did not think it was a fun assignment (...) I have horrid handwriting, and I just find it tiring, boring. Not fun at all”. Student K did not mention if she enjoyed the task; she mainly stated that the task was challenging for her.

Difficulty of the Task

Exploration stage students did not experience the current part of the assignment as difficult. However, even though they have some ideas about their future careers, they are still unsure how their lives will be when they grow up. So, some of them consequently experienced the future part of the task as slightly challenging. Student A remarked,

I already knew for myself what I like to do and that I want to go to the havo [i.e. higher level of secondary education]. (...) However, I did not have any idea about the future. I have thought about it but not really in that way, so it was more difficult to make the future one.

Student A stated the SDTs would even be more difficult if she had not decided what profession she wanted to pursue.

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In contrast to students in the exploration stage, most students in the growth stage described the task as complex. They generally experienced the future part of the assignment as most challenging because they did not know what profession they want to pursue. Two students specifically found the current SDT challenging. When asked “How did you experience thinking about yourself like that?”, Student H answered, “Difficult, especially the current one (...) I do not know what I am good at and what I like”. Personal insecurities sometimes seem to influence why students find the task difficult and complex. Student K explained,

I am a person who has many doubts about things and myself. I am not sure about all my thoughts, what I want, and what I wanted to write down [during the task]. So many doubts and uncertainty like ‘do I want this’ or ‘do I have doubts?’ or ‘is it a good idea?’ (...) And then time went by so quickly, and I wrote down two things.

These interview fragments about task difficulty showed that in addition to not knowing what career path to follow, students in the growth stage sometimes do not have a clear idea of who they are at this moment in life.

Two students specifically mentioned the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on knowing and exploring who they are because they had fewer possibilities to go out. Students could not, for instance, participate in certain activities, such as sports, hobbies, and socialising with friends or family. Some students experienced difficulty choosing a study programme because they could not visit possible future schools. Student K had a hard time deciding what to do after graduating from secondary school, saying, “I think it is important that you also feel a bit at home in a school, as you will be there very often”. She hoped that there would be open houses at the end of the year.

Perceived Value for Career Development

All students in the exploration stage perceived some value in doing the task. Most students saw advantages in thinking more deeply about their existing future ideas and perceived the task as a valuable step after choosing what study programme to pursue. It provided them an idea of how their future will or can be. Some students affirmed the value of thinking about the future beyond only having a career. Student D explained,

Suppose you choose to be a flight attendant (...) I do not think you can say you want to achieve all those things in the Netherlands, for example, having a huge house. Because if you are a flight attendant, you are often away from home. So, I think this assignment makes you reflect on your life outside your profession. I like that very much because your profession determines, in some ways, what you can do in your life.

The task thus allowed students to check whether their general future ideas match their career prospects.

Some students specifically stated the value of writing or drawing their thoughts on paper. As previously mentioned, writing down thoughts enabled students to take the time to reflect on their ideas. In fact, two students stated that a digital assignment would not have the same benefits as a paper-and-pencil assignment. Student A stated, "I would get less out of myself than with a writing assignment because with a digital assignment, I simply type it down quickly. Now, I really had to think, 'Okay, what am I actually writing down?'" These students confirmed that they would take a digital assignment less seriously.

A few growth-stage students reported the task's usefulness but to a lesser extent than those in the exploration stage. Students in the growth stage were more sceptical about the value of the assignment. Student H stated, "I think it is useful to have a goal for 10 years from

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now, so you can work towards that. On the other hand, I also think [that] we will see where we will be in 10 years". However, most students in both the exploration and growth stages would find it helpful to make the SDTs as part of a counselling conversation with a tutor. For students in the growth stage, communication about the assignment seems necessary to be valuable.

Connection of Observed Experiences

Students who enjoyed the SDTs did not find it difficult and considered it helpful to their career development. Conversely, students who did not enjoy the task generally perceived it as difficult and not helpful to their career development. Task enjoyment, difficulty and value, therefore, appear to be related. Positive experiences were more likely to be encountered by students in the exploration stage. Students in the growth stage often had more moderated, negative or skeptical experiences regarding the SDTs.

Discussion

Many secondary-education students experience stress during the career decision-making process (Giddens, 1991; Holmegaard et al., 2012; Smeters, 2018). In previous centuries, people often followed the professional examples of their family members (Giddens, 1991). Today, most students aspire for a career path that complements their identity and who they want to become in the future, but they feel as if they need to gain more insight into these aspects (Smeters, 2018). Amongst other career development theories, the life-span, life-space theory and narrative approaches to study-choice counselling consider the importance of a holistic view of identity in career orientation. However, even though multiple studies focus on the connection between identity and career development, there are few studies on the specific activities that foster identity development to help students make career choices. Funds of identity (FoI) scholarship emphasise identity exploration and development through self-definition tasks (SDT). SDTs are creative tasks, such as drawing self-portraits, to help people

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define important aspects of their lives, such as people, institutions or interests (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011). To consider a holistic approach to identity and career development, this study aimed to investigate how secondary school students experience engaging in SDTs to reflect on their identity and career development.

Students in their final year of secondary education engaged in SDTs wherein they wrote or drew about who they were at that moment in their life and how they envisioned their future identity. Eleven students were interviewed about their experiences. The life-span, life-space theory of Super (1984) recognises that career development begins at a young age and consists of five stages. The growth and exploration stages are generally related to childhood and adolescence (Herr, 1997). During the growth stage, students gain insights into their interests and abilities (Patton & McMahon, 2006; Wood & Kaszubowski, 2008), while in the exploration stage, general interests become career options (Super, 1990). Super's theory suggests that career guidance should begin at an early stage, but little research has been conducted on specific tasks suitable for the distinct stages of growth and exploration. Therefore, the present study additionally explored differences in experiences between students in the exploration stage and those in the growth stage.

The data analysis resulted in four types of observation on students' experiences of engaging in SDTs. The first observation refers to the application of the task where students' experiences are mainly focused on the different ways to express themselves, the task setting, and the task implementation. The results imply that 10th-grade students feel more comfortable expressing themselves through words than through drawings. In addition, students differed in their experiences regarding the task setting; some were positive about undertaking the task in a classroom setting, while others preferred completing it at home. The results also affirm that students are optimistic about integrating an SDT into career counselling conversations with their teachers because it allows them to define the conversations' content and decrease the

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risk of unexpected or challenging questions. These experiences regarding to the task application do not seem to relate to the students' career development stage.

In terms of the analysis of the task enjoyment, level of difficulty and perceived value, the present study suggests that students in the exploration stage generally evaluate SDTs as more positive than students in the growth stage do. One observation to support this deduction is that most exploration-stage students embraced the task because it was different to what they would usually do and they enjoyed thinking about their future. Students in the growth stage, however, did not much enjoy the SDTs. A further observation is that students in the exploration stage experienced the task as less complicated than students in the growth stage did. In general, students from both career development stages perceived the future SDT as most difficult. Some growth-stage students also found the current part of the task complex because they did not know who they were and what they enjoyed doing. The final observation indicating that exploration-stage students experience the task as more positive than growth-stage students do is that the former group perceived more value in engaging in the task than the latter group did. The most commonly mentioned value aspect of the SDTs was its promoting of students' deep and thorough reflection on their current and future identities and exploration of whether their ideas match their career prospects.

FoI research generally concerns exploring and acknowledging people's existing self-understanding. Poole (2017) is one of the few FoI researchers who focused on exploring new identities by creating multiple avatars. The results of the present study contribute to Poole's line of reasoning, affirming that completing a present-and-future SDT is beneficial to exploring new or partially new identities. According to narrative career counselling theorists, career plans are constructed according to one's whole life story, and a person's past, present and future life experiences must be uncovered for them to make deliberate career choices (Brott, 2001; Cochran, 1997). This study reveals that SDTs might be valuable for career

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counsellors in secondary education to support students in uncovering their life experiences by visualising their thoughts, as well as indicating that SDTs can contribute to students' career development.

This study also suggests that several students' experiences of engaging in the SDTs are related to their stages of career development. When considering the observed experiences, it can be concluded that the SDTs used in this research are mainly helpful for students in the exploration stage. It enables them to envision themselves as adults with a particular job. However, the study indicates that students in the growth stage tend to be sceptical about these specific SDTs. Growth-stage students might need to gain further insight into their current career-relevant self-concepts, abilities and interests before thinking about their future identity and life.

Last, the research of Leontiev et al. (2020) provides additional explanations for the differences between students in the growth stage and students in the exploration stage. According to their research, the capacity to make complex choices, such as deciding on a study programme, is related to several personality factors. Students with self-control, life-purpose and a high tolerance of uncertainty tend to make more autonomous, unambiguous and satisfying choices. Thus, personal characteristics and general well-being may be predictors of the students' career decision-making process and are, therefore, possibly related to experiences regarding tasks that aim to foster this process.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study indicate that students differ in how they experience engaging in SDTs and that career development stage is often related to perceived experiences. This is valuable in that teachers can use this information when implementing SDTs in their career counselling. Nonetheless, the exploratory results and possible explanations of this study do raise further questions that could be answered by conducting future research. This

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study found that students who have no concrete ideas about their future career encounter fewer positive experiences regarding SDTs than students who do have concrete career ideas. However, the former group might benefit more from tasks that help foster the process of finding a suitable career; the latter group students are already further along in this process. Because Leontiev et al. (2020) suggest that positive experiences during the process of choosing a career or study programme increase one's academic motivation and future satisfaction in life, it might be valuable to explore how to ensure positive experiences for all students.

A limitation of this study is that the participants faced many life-changing events when engaging in the SDTs. They soon had to decide what to do after graduation, and final examinations would take place in the near future; hence, SDTs might have been inconvenient at that moment in time. When investigating the same target group, it may be helpful for future researchers to conduct the SDTs earlier in the year. Researchers can also focus on younger students who have more time to determine who they are and what they want to do after graduating from secondary school. Moreover, researchers can explore different SDTs for different ages or stages of career development. The teacher of the participating students expected that younger adolescents would not prefer writing due to changes in creativity and self-awareness during puberty. Another suggestion for future research is to focus on the impact of an SDT through a longitudinal study to determine how it helps students in their career development.

The last limitation is that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students mentioned that the pandemic influenced their process of finding a study programme and their experiences regarding the SDTs. They could not visit possible future schools and had fewer possibilities to orient themselves through school activities. COVID-19 measurements also prevented students from going out and exploring what interests them.

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Future researchers can focus on the same target group and subjects as the present research but without the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the results of this research can be confirmed or invalidated.

Practical Implications

This study affirmed that SDTs can be used in many ways as part of career counselling in secondary education. First, the findings revealed the value of integrating SDTs into a career counselling conversation between a teacher and a student. As previous studies of Holmegaard et al. (2012) and Thomas and Gibbons (2009) suggest, secondary education students desire to control their study choice process and fear that a teacher overly influences this process. Using SDTs as part of a counselling conversation can fulfil students' desire to control the process of finding a suitable career path. Simultaneously, students can take advantage of a career counsellor's expertise and advice regarding their career development. An SDT can serve as a stimulator during such a conversation, helping the student prepare and the teacher gather ideas about what questions to ask.

Second, the results showed that students should start the SDTs in the classroom and finish it at home. Doing so enables students to discuss the task with their classmates and allows teachers to ask facilitative and reflective questions that can help students during the task. Allowing students to finish the task at home ensures that they do it at their own pace and time in a private, quiet and safe environment. This can support students' reflection about their career development, as they can think more deeply about who they are and what they want in life without being interrupted by their classmates.

In summary, the present research connects FoI to career development. It provides valuable insights into how SDTs support students in their identity exploration and

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development, help them in their career development, and reduce stress regarding their study choice.

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Appendix A Interview instrument

Concept-(ualisation)	Operationalisation	Indicators	Interview Qs
<i>Career development stage</i>	Career choices	Amount of choice possibilities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many possibilities for study programmes do you currently have in mind? 2. Do you have a favourite one? 3. Which one is your favourite?
	Experiences with choosing	To what extent they like the process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you like choosing a study programme 2. How did you experience this process so far?
		Excitement for choice(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Are you excited for your next study? 4. What do you expect of the new phase you will go in?
	Students' approach of making a study choice	How they made the choice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you do in order to make a choice?
		People they talked to	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. With whom did you talk about your study choice? 3. Which people were the most helpful? 4. Why?
		possibilities in school	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is SCC provided on your school? 2. Did you go to a study choice counsellor? 3. Did you participate in lessons for study choice counselling? 4. What do you value most? 5. What do you miss?

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		Other things they did	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Did you went to an open day at a school? 2. Did you searched on the internet?
<i>Self-definition task</i>	Experience with SDT Performance on SDT	General	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you experience doing the task?
		Approach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long did you think about what you wanted to create? 2. How did you start? 3. Why did you choose to write instead of draw?
		Creation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you explain to me what you created? (first and second self-portrait) 2. What does it say about you? 3. What are differences between the first self-portrait and the second?
		Easiness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was it difficult to make the task? 2. What made it difficult/easy? 3. Which of the two SDTs you experienced as most difficult? Why?
		Usefulness / Influence on study choice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Did you learn something? 5. What did you learn? 6. Was it helpful? 7. What was specifically helpful (or not)? 8. How could it be more helpful? 9. Would you like this task being part of a career

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			counselling conversation? Why (not)?
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Appendix B Figures and Tables**Figure B1**

Participants' career development stage and choice status of what to do after graduation

	Stage	Choice status of what to do after graduation
Student A	Exploration	Chose to follow a higher general level of secondary education. She has some ideas of what to study afterwards.
Student B	Exploration	Chose a specific post-secondary vocational study programme
Student C	Exploration	Chose a specific post-secondary vocational study programme
Student D	Exploration	Chose a specific post-secondary vocational study programme
Student E	Exploration	Chose a specific post-secondary vocational study programme
Student F	Exploration	Some idea of a future career path, figuring out which study programme might fit
Student G	Growth	Chose to follow a higher general level of secondary education, but has no idea what to do afterward
Student H	Growth	Figuring out what post-secondary vocational study direction they want to follow
Student I	Growth	Figuring out what post-secondary vocational study direction they want to follow
Student J	Growth	Figuring out what post-secondary vocational study direction they want to follow
Student K	Growth	Figuring out what post-secondary vocational study direction they want to follow

Appendix C Information letter and Informed Consent; Students

Beste leerling van 4A,

Mijn naam is Astrid en met deze brief wil ik je graag uitnodigen om deel te nemen aan mijn onderzoek voor de Master Onderwijswetenschappen. In deze brief geef ik meer informatie over mijn onderzoek en wat het betekent om hieraan deel te nemen.

Het onderzoek

Aan het einde van de middelbare school periode maken leerlingen een keuze wat ze na het behalen van hun diploma willen gaan doen. Veel leerlingen hebben baat bij ondersteuning in dit proces. Daarom is LOB een verplicht onderdeel in het middelbaar onderwijs.

Vorige week heb je een LOB taak gedaan waarbij je de opdracht kreeg om na te denken over wie je bent op dit moment in je leven en hoe je jezelf in de toekomst ziet. Deze week ga ik met een aantal van jullie in gesprek over de studiekeuzes op dit moment, wat je hebt gedaan om je te oriënteren op de mogelijkheden en wat je ervan vond om zo'n creatieve identiteitstaak te maken.

Het gesprek duurt ongeveer 30 minuten. Mocht je tijdens het gesprek toch beslissen om te willen stoppen, dan kan dit op elk moment. Je hoeft geen reden voor het stoppen te noemen.

Risico's en voordelen

Deelname aan het onderzoek brengt geen risico's met zich mee. De opdrachten en gesprekken worden niet beoordeeld met een cijfer en hebben geen andere consequenties.

Mogelijk kan het gesprek leiden tot meer inzicht in je eigen studiekeuze. Daarnaast kan jouw bijdrage aan het onderzoek inzicht geven in studieloopbaan begeleiding op middelbare scholen.

Vertrouwelijkheid en privacy

Met alle verzamelde informatie zal vertrouwelijk worden omgegaan. De creatieve identiteitstaken worden alleen door mij ingezien.

Met jouw goedkeuring wordt het gesprek opgenomen, zodat deze later kan worden uitgeschreven. Dit wordt gedaan om te voorkomen dat informatie verkeerd wordt begrepen.

De opnames van het interview worden na het opschrijven verwijderd. Daarnaast zal het interview anoniem worden gemaakt door je naam niet weer te geven.

Ethische commissie

Dit onderzoek is goedgekeurd door de ethische commissie van de Universiteit Utrecht. Dit betekent dat wordt voldaan aan de richtlijnen waar sociaal wetenschappelijk onderzoek aan moet voldoen.

Voor klachten kun je mailen naar: klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl.

SELF-DEFINITION TASKS AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Contactgegevens van de Data Protection Officer van de Universiteit Utrecht (“Functionaris Gegevensbescherming”) zijn te vinden op de volgende website:

<https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/data-protection-officer>

Contact gegevens

Voor vragen of aanvullende informatie kan je contact met mij opnemen. Mijn email adres is:

a.l.malschaert@students.uu.nl.

Toestemmingsformulier

Bij het tekenen van dit formulier verklaar je voldoende te zijn geïnformeerd over het onderzoek, deze informatie te begrijpen en vrijwillig deel te nemen aan het onderzoek. Je hebt de mogelijkheid gekregen om vragen te stellen beseft dat je op elk moment de deelname aan het onderzoek kan stopzetten, zonder dat hier consequenties aan verbonden zijn.

Hieronder kan je je naam en handtekening zetten.

Naam:

Datum:

Handtekening:

Appendix D Information letter and informed consent: parents

Titel

Hoe kunnen self-definition tasks studenten ondersteunen in het maken van hun studiekeuze?

Datum:

Beste (naam ouder),

Mijn naam is Astrid en met deze brief wil ik toestemming vragen voor de deelname van uw kind aan mijn scriptie. Dit onderzoek is onderdeel van mijn master Onderwijswetenschappen aan de Universiteit Utrecht. In deze brief zal ik meer informatie geven over mijn onderzoek en wat het betekent om hieraan deel te nemen als participant.

Doel onderzoek

Aan het einde van de middelbare school periode maken studenten een keuze wat ze na het behalen van hun diploma willen gaan doen. Veel studenten hebben baat bij ondersteuning in dit proces. Daarom is studieloopbaan begeleiding een verplicht onderdeel in het middelbaar onderwijs.

Omdat zelfreflectie een belangrijk onderdeel is bij het kiezen van een studie, is het belangrijk om studenten hierbij te helpen. Self-definition tasks zijn creatieve opdrachten die deze zelfreflectie kunnen stimuleren. Daarom is het doel van deze studie het achterhalen van hoe self-definition tasks ingezet kunnen worden in het studiekeuze proces.

Procedure

Aan het begin van deze les geven de studenten schriftelijk antwoord op een de vraag of ze momenteel al weten wat ze willen gaan doen na de middelbare school. Tijdens de les maken ze een self-definition task, welke aan het einde van de les door mij wordt meegenomen.

Vervolgens vraag ik aantal de studenten om verder deel te nemen aan mijn onderzoek. Dit zal gaan om een eenmalig interview met mij alleen. Het interview zal ongeveer 30 minuten duren. Tijdens het gesprek zijn de studenten vrij om op elk gewenst moment te stoppen. Hiervoor hoeft geen specifieke reden worden genoemd.

Risico's en voordelen

Deelname aan het onderzoek brengt geen risico's met zich mee. Mogelijk kan het gesprek leiden tot meer inzicht in de studiekeuze. Daarnaast kan de deelname aan het onderzoek inzicht geven in studieloopbaan begeleiding op middelbare scholen.

Vertrouwelijkheid en privacy

Met alle verzamelde informatie zal vertrouwelijk worden omgegaan. De self-definition tasks worden door mij en de leraar bekeken en zal verder door niemand worden ingezien.

Met jouw goedkeuring en die van de student wordt het gesprek opgenomen, zodat deze later kan worden uitgeschreven. Dit wordt gedaan om te voorkomen dat informatie verkeerd wordt geïnterpreteerd. De opnames van het interview worden na de transcriptie verwijderd. Daarnaast zal het interview anoniem worden gemaakt door namen te verwijderen

SELF-DEFINITION TASKS AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Ethische commissie

Dit onderzoek is goedgekeurd door de ethische commissie van de Universiteit Utrecht. Dit betekent dat wordt voldaan aan de richtlijnen waar sociaal wetenschappelijk onderzoek aan moet voldoen.

Voor klachten kun je mailen naar: klachtenfunctionaris-fetcsocwet@uu.nl.

Contactgegevens van de Data Protection Officer van de Universiteit Utrecht (“Functionaris Gegevensbescherming”) zijn te vinden op de volgende website:

<https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/data-protection-officer>

Contact gegevens

Voor vragen of aanvullende informatie kan je contact met mij opnemen. Mijn email adres is:

a.l.malschaert@students.uu.nl

Toestemmingsformulier: deelname onderzoek kind

Bij het tekenen van dit formulier verklaart u voldoende te zijn geïnformeerd over het onderzoek, de informatie te begrijpen en dat uw kind vrijwillig deel neemt aan het onderzoek. Uw kind heeft de mogelijkheid gekregen om vragen te stellen en beseft dat deze op elk moment de deelname aan het onderzoek kan stopzetten, zonder dat hier consequenties aan verbonden zijn.

Naam:

Datum:

Handtekening:

Appendix E Ethical Approval

P.O. Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht The Board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences Utrecht University P.O. Box 80.140 3508 TC Utrecht		Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences Faculty Support Office Ethics Committee Visiting Address Padualaan 14 3584 CH Utrecht
Our Description Telephone E-mail Date Subject	21-0467 030 253 46 33 FETC-fsw@uu.nl 27 February 2021 Ethical approval	

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Study: Self-reflection and identity exploration in the process of high school students' process of choosing a study programme

Principal investigator: A.L. Malschaert

Supervisor: Monique Verhoeven

This student research project does not belong to the regimen of the Dutch Act on Medical Research Involving Human Subjects, and therefore there is no need for approval of a Medical Ethics Committee.

The study is approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University. The approval is based on the documents send by the researchers as requested in the form of the Ethics committee and filed under number 21-0467. The approval is valid through 07 June 2021. Given the review reference of the Ethics Committee, there are no objections to execution of the proposed research project, as described in the protocol and according to the GPDR It should be noticed that any changes in the research design oblige a renewed review by the Ethics Committee by submitting an amendement

Yours sincerely,



Peter van der Heijden, Ph.D.
 Chair