



Guidance as an Art of Balancing – **Research results and practical applications**

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Who is talking?



- Former professor of career guidance, University of Eastern Finland, presently independent researcher, entrepreneur and writer
- Background: **adult education, conversation analysis**
- **University pedagogical training** and development
- **Entrepreneur**: Work supervision; wellbeing at work; training of guidance skills for individuals and communities
- Special interest in generic aspects of guidance; **modeling guidance activity**

My focus today:

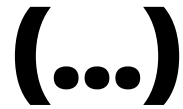
- Interaction research perspectives on guidance & counselling that have been useful in
 - training guidance practitioners
 - modeling guidance → textbook in guidance (Vehviläinen, S. 2014/2020 "Guide to guidance: together towards agency"), a summary in Vehviläinen 2021 (Journal of Counsellogy)



- NOTE: **"guidance" as an umbrella term** for a family of practices of **counselling, guidance, and also supervision** (Finnish "*ohjaus*", Swedish "*vägledning*")
- guidance as a profession (career guidance in schools and universities, work counselling) but also a working method (in teaching, social work, leadership...)

A note about the Finnish guidance system

- One of the Nordic countries – guidance as part of Nordic welfare system (Hagaseth Haug et al. 2020)
 - comprehensive school system & employment services
- Career guidance in Finland: a service that is a mandatory part of comprehensive, secondary, and higher education
 - Since 1970's, all pupils in comprehensive school & secondary school have a subjective right to guidance
- Career guidance is embedded in the curricula
 - group lessons and interventions but also a service for individuals.



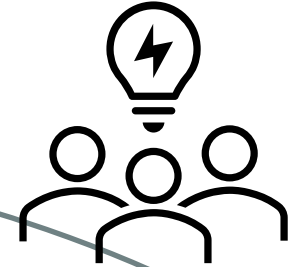
- Career guidance also provided by labour market services, trade unions and private businesses
- Within all guidance and counselling occupations, career guidance is the most professionalized one in the Finnish context
 - the master degree requirements
 - strong national steering from the Ministry of Education under the policies of “lifelong guidance”,
 - national recommendations for ethical practice and competence requirements
- Strongly associated with the teaching professions – background in education rather than psychology
- New Act 2022: Extension of compulsory education (15→18); everyone will get a secondary education
 - Compulsory provision of intensified career guidance counselling for pupils who might have risks in their transition to secondary level

A note about conversation analysis ("CA")

- CA - a theoretical approach and methodology to study recorded multimodal interactional practices; **multimodal interaction as an order on its own right** (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012)
- CA investigates recordings of **naturally occurring interactions** to uncover the practices through which social actions are constructed by the participants in their **turn-by-turn activities** (Schegloff, 2007).
- The analysis "takes apart" what the participants have put together: **the sequentially organized activities** that accomplish all social life; encounters such as guidance



What is guidance?



Guidance is a set of **collaborative** activities that foster & support **processes that are meaningful for the client(s)** - those of learning, growth, work, life design or other aspects of their life.

This is done in such a way that the participants' **agency and participatory sense is strengthened. Or: hindrances for agency are lessened.**

The focal processes are viewed as biographical, social and societal. = "**horizons for action**"

(Vehviläinen 2014; 2021; Vehviläinen & Souto 2021

On participatory sense Alhanen 2019; horizons Hodgkinson & Sparkes 1997)

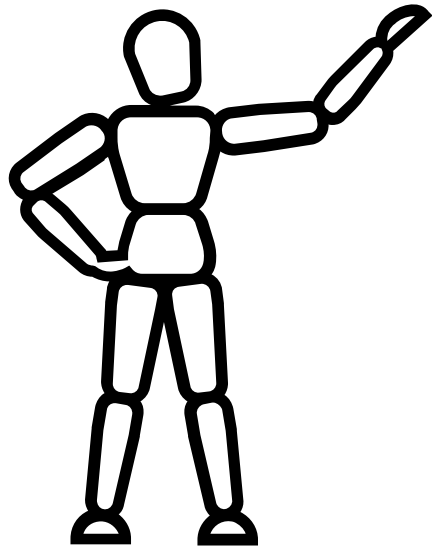


What is "agency"?

- widening or diversified opportunities for action and participation in a particular social context
- perceived as a relationship between individuals and society, and it is viewed intersectionally (i.e. considering various mechanisms of social inequality (Crenshaw, 1989))



Elements of agency



Motivation
Interest
Volition
Self-efficacy

Competencies, knowledge
Attitudes
Authorship
Creativity

Relational agency
Participation, belonging
Critical consciousness
Activity, activism

Values

Self-knowledge

Social and cultural context



Literature on agency

- Bandura 1989, Billet & Pavlova 2005; Giddens 1991; Edwards 2011; Hopwood 2022; Eteläpelto ym. 2013; Sannino & Engeström 2018; Vehviläinen & Souto 2021; Toiviainen 2022; Toom, Pyhältö & Rust 2015; Vähäsantanen ym. 2017



Comments?

Why "balancing"?

- In fact, all forms of guidance seem to be inherently tensioned; it seems to be part of the nature of this practice and the way in which is used in our societies
- For instance,
 - guidance at public employment sector
 - career and study guidance in secondary and higher education
 - supervising workplace learning and internships in workplaces



What do professionals say about balancing in guidance?

How to balance expert perspective and student perspective

"It is difficult (...) to find a balance between guiding, and making room for their (=student's) own thoughts and perspectives. How much is it necessary to give concrete advice, and when is it okay to let the process proceed according to the student's own views?"

How to foster student-centeredness

"(It is difficult to) know how to recognize and be aware of the student's own abilities and needs. I mean, when does the student need 'pampering' and when do they manage on their own?"

(Vehviläinen 2014, written assignment data; academic supervision)



Dimensions of understanding guidance as a tensioned practice

- tensions = various intersecting interests and aims at play; not necessarily negative

1 Different understandings of the functions of guidance in society

- Guidance as an equalizer of work and educational pathways, wellbeing, participation, and various forms of capital
 - Policies of lifelong guidance and the citizen's right to guidance at different stages of life, especially as part of the education system and employment services
- Guidance **qualifies, equips**, and creates paths for individuals, helping them to become included in society and to move into its expected roles and transitions → **optimism**

OR

- Guidance functions as a mechanism that **adapts and commits individuals to an individualistic culture**, self-management, and continuous self-modification, and ultimately shifts responsibility for societal issues onto individuals → **skepticism**
 - So-called therapeutic power or therapisation (e.g. Brunila et al. 2021)

- Is there **a third way** between these? (Vehviläinen & Souto 2021; Vehviläinen 2021, Toiviainen 2022)
 - social justice approach (Hooley, Sultana, Thomsen 2018; 2019)
- Can guidance be developed with critical awareness of the conditions shaping it, while also seeking, imagining, and experimenting with agency-strengthening, emancipatory possibilities of guidance?

2 Guidance practices and work processes as inherently tensioned

- Research on guidance practices repeatedly **highlights internal tensions within work activities**. These tensions relate, for instance, to institutional objectives and the resources and constraints of the work, to the relationship between the counsellor/mentor and the person being guided (client/pupil/student, etc.), as well as to professional ideals (Sultana & Watts 2005; Raetsaari, Suorsa, Muukkonen 2020; Kosonen et al. 2025)



INTERVIEWER: Yes. How do you see it, what sort of expectations are directed at your work and where do they come from?

*LABOUR MARKET GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER: Yes – well at least on the **employer's and funder's part the expectations are that solutions would be found, and people would be led to paths to worklife or open labour market or training.** I mean ... **To training that leads to a degree.** So to some extent ... It has caused a stir in our work community because **these things are measured statistically ...***

**) Interview data from research project 'Guidance expertise in collaboration', 2021-2023, ESF project, UEF*

*LABOUR MARKET GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER: "...And then **very strong professional ethical conflicts emerge** and there's exactly the question of **whose goal guides the work** (...) because in our case it is guided by legislation, which is tied to the authorities' official duties. But then there is also the client's goal, perhaps our own goal from an expertise perspective, and then there may even be a network that pulls us in another direction and looks at things from a different viewpoint. So it really isn't a simple matter to start thinking about how the goals are positioned..."*

INTERVIEWER: How do you experience those kinds of expectations? What do they feel like? How do they affect your work?

*LABOUR MARKET GUIDANCE PRACTITIONER: : Well... yes. Sometimes I kind of feel that, well, I try not to take too much pressure from them, because I think that quite often, **in the client's journey, even if it is "just" a transition, it can be an enormously big step in that individual's life.** So, I want to focus my energy more on that way of thinking, rather than looking so much at the outcomes. Of course, I do always try my best with the outcomes as well, but somehow I think that I can only do my best, and in the end not everything is in my hands.*

Outcome of guidance in educational, career, and labour market contexts (Vehviläinen 2000)

- **"Product approach"** – typical in guidance policies and institutional measurement of outcome
 - Guidance is used as a **tool to ensure** that those individuals who have trouble in attaining a particular institutionally expected step in the life course and participating in expected roles in society, will attain these goals
 - The institutional outcome "drives" and constrains the interaction – causes tensions for practitioners
 - Prominent approach to guidance in neoliberal or "technocratic" interpretations of guidance (Sultana 2018; Guichard 2022): guidance is a tool to ensure the workings of the economy and to comply to the status quo

- **"Process approach"** – typically guidance researchers' approach to outcome
 - Career counselling and other guidance theories suggest that **guidance can influence some key factor** that regulates outcome ("**career adaptability**", "**workability**", "**career maturity**", "**engagement**", "**agency**" etc.)
 - This influence is seen as a **co-influence** with various other factors (or agents)
 - The change that occurs is not always the institutionally expected one, the timing of the change may also vary
 - A result of guidance may also be viewed as a **qualitative change in the premises of the problem** (Leiman 2015)
 - **Thus, the success of the process cannot be determined by prototypical outcome solutions. The "expected outcome" should not colonize the process!**



In fact: both practitioners and clients end up balancing these two approaches in their interactions

- Participants of guidance activities **experience** the "pull" of various constraints in their activities
- Balancing also seems constitutive feature of how institutional guidance **practices are designed** *in situ*



Reflection: What do you think about these points - i.e. guidance as a tensioned practice?

3 Balancing and situational adjustment enacted in guidance interaction situations

- Interactional practices of guidance have evolved to balance between different, often tension-filled aims – this is everyday reality in guidance work.
- How can one influence the client in the direction of institutional goals and/or one's own professional perspective while at the same time preserving the client's authority over their own life and experiences?
 - Among the most central shared features of all guidance is the aim to treat the client as the expert of their own life, and thus as a subject within the guidance interaction; someone who “owns their process”

Comparing interactional practices in types of encounters

(Vehviläinen 2014, 2021)

Service encounter

- Clients brings problem + is interviewed
- Professional provides a solution based on their expert knowledge
- **Problem-solving orientation**

Therapeutic encounter

- Client brings & narrates problem(s)
- Professional invites client to explore, interpret and understand this "material" with the professional
- **Inquiry orientation**
- **Supportive orientation**

Guidance encounter

- Combination of the other two: problems are explored but also expert solutions are sought
- **Balancing between these orientations**

Three main orientations in guidance/supervision



Problem solving orientation

Orientation to identifying problems

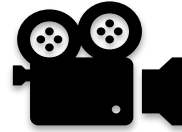
Fixing them asap

Supervisor often provides solutions

It is supervisor's job to "fix things"

ADVICE, SOLUTIONS

FEEDBACK



Inquiry orientation

Orientation to deeper understanding

Not taking for granted what they key issue is

No need to find quick fix

It is valuable in itself to understand more

Both may learn

**REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS,
INTERPRETATIONS AND
COMMENTARY**



Supporting orientation

Orientation to focusing, being present

Helping student to observe what is necessary to observe

Concentration, calmness

Friendliness

Not running away from unpleasant or difficult things

ACTIVE LISTENING, FRIENDLY CALM MANNER

What is the point?

- Both the supervisor and the supervisee can and will influence the course of the conversation
- Both participants can be “invited to” or “pulled into” an orientation during the conversation
- The key for the guidance professional: recognizing these orientations and using them flexibly
- Orientations discussed here in the context of individual supervision, but they are relevant in group supervision too

Take a moment to reflect in small groups

- Does this make sense to you?
- Do you recognize these orientations?

Lessons from CA research on guidance and counselling since 1990's

Various “balancing issues” in guidance & counselling contexts

1. Counselling about health: dilemmas of advice and information-giving
2. Counselling about career and employment: dilemmas of personally relevant advice
3. Finding a joint working problem in dyadic counselling: dilemmas of decision-making I

Counselling about health: dilemmas of advice and information

HIV /AIDS counselling

- 1990's, various studies were conducted on HIV / AIDS counselling
 - Institutional aims: to prevent the spreading of HIV virus and to help people cope with the illness or its possibility
- The task of the interaction was to provide information and advice in ways that would influence the clients in ways to promote safe sex behaviour: **thus clear aim to influence health & sexual behaviour**
- Balancing issues
 - To influence the client's behaviour based on expert knowledge WHILE respecting the sphere of their privacy
 - To engage the client in talk about issues that are socially difficult to disclose (sex, illness, death)
 - To provide information concerning these topics without assuming their personal relevance
(Kinnell & Maynard 1996; Peräkylä 1995; Silverman et al 1991, Silverman 1997)

- Balancing strategies

- Advice-as-information, or giving advice on “hypothetical problems”

(Peräkylä 1995)

- **The interview format** (*stepwise entry*) – the relevance for the advice is co-constructed in the interaction through a question answer sequence that establishes the advice-able problem prior the delivery of the advice

(Silverman et al 1991)

- Circular interview technique: how techniques of ‘live open supervision’ and hypothetical questions helped balance the tasks of making the client talk and respecting their social face

(Peräkylä 1995)

To summarize

- Guidance (=or counselling) is used in these settings to influence the client's behaviour or to help them make informed choices, and these tasks are grounded in expert knowledge that is treated as authoritative
 - Advice and information-giving as key practices
- These tasks need to be balanced with the norm of client autonomy or client-centeredness
- **Stepwise entry to advice:** When advice is preceded by sequence where client's views are elicited and explored; it creates various advantages for the professional
 - The client may bring up something "advice-relevant" and align as advice-recipient
 - The client may recognize and understand the relevance of the advice
 - The advice may be aligned with the client's perspective
- Unsolicited and unprepared advice runs the risk of being not fitted nor wanted, and gets resistance.

Counselling about career and employment: dilemmas of advice II

- In career-guidance training, unemployed adults or adolescents, were recruited by the labour market offices, engaged in various activities to draw an action plan for their future career and employment.
- The career guidance training professionals in the courses (i.e., “counsellors”) facilitated this process. The learning process was meant to take place through various course activities: **group work and discussions, lectures, field trips, information gathering, work practice, self-evaluation, and individual counselling.**
- Counselling = a method for promoting individual learning, career decision making as well as planning and evaluation of the course process. **In educational contexts, guidance often gets control functions.**

(Vehviläinen 1999; 2001; 2003)

- Generally, advice-giving has been shown to be a central practice in guidance contexts...
(Butler ym. 2010; Emmison, Butler & Danby 2011; Emmison & Firth 2012; Kinnell & Maynard 1996; Pudlinski 2012; Silverman 1997; Silverman, Peräkylä & Bor 1992; Strong & Baron 2004; Svinhufvud 2008; Vehviläinen 1999; 2001; 2003; Vine, Holmes & Marra 11 2012; Waring 2005; 2007; 2012)
- **...despite the professional theories that recommend against advice**
(see Couture & Sutherland 2006)
- Variation of the stepwise entry: how the client's (=student's) future plans are co-constructed
- The professional's knowledge was often offered, and treated, as having strong epistemic authority, but it was presented as tightly dependent on the views and choices the student has disclosed
(Vehviläinen 1999, 2001, 2001b)

1st position

2nd position

3rd position

Counsellor:

Client:

Counsellor:

Question

Response

Advice that builds on the
response

Using stepwise entry to advice in career guidance

- Generally: The advantage of the stepwise entry is in the possibility to
 - Focus the client's talk topically
 - Let them voice their perspective and examine that perspective
 - Present the professional perspectives in a position where their relevance is "at hand"
 - Align the professional view with the client's view (help minimize resistance)
- In career guidance settings, professionals use expert knowledge but not in the same way as in health settings. What is relevant to each client depends on their interests, competencies and life situation. (And professional's own expertise!)
- The stepwise entry is used to find out **what is relevant for this client (student)**
 - In my data: what were the client's preferences among the work placements and try-out periods they had in the career guidance training
 - These preferences and interests were topicalized via counsellor's questions and then advice fitted to the responses

1 CO: question eliciting student's perspective

2 ST: response

3 CO: advice that builds on the response

(Career guidance) "Favourite placement"

CO: that's what the sales work is like,

ST: mmm
(15.2)

1-> CO: mhmm, so (.) so tha- >in fact< this has been your favourite this (la- last placem-)

2-> ST: =yes, absolutely
(0.3)

CO: .yeah:
(1.8)

1-> CO: would you stay in that sort of work tryout placement to continue if you could,
(1.8)

2-> ST: we::ll (.) I wouldn't stay there,
(0.4)

CO: Yes=

2-> ST: =but I could go?,
(0.3)

CO: to some clothing [shop] to take

2-> ST: [right]

OH: a work placement yes
(1.0)

3-> OH: and that is what is worthwhile to do in the autumn

3-> then on that work placement
(0.4)

3-> benefit,
(1.6)

CO: if you want to have a holiday in the summer so,

ST: yeah hahh

- I also found the professionals sometimes **challenged** their clients' responses
 - They gained **argumentative advantage** in delivering advice in 3rd position
- I later found this pattern also in academic guidance/supervision: as a tool to check students' understandings and remedy misunderstandings
(Vehviläinen 2001; 2001b; 2014b)
- In pedagogical settings, the advice or feedback needs to be **understood**, not only acknowledged. At times, teacher's concern over this dimension of understanding surfaces in the interaction → **stepwise entry helps in this**
(Vehviläinen 2009b)

- **The stepwise entry seemed a central balancing strategy in career and educational guidance settings.**



Planning sequences in career guidance

- In career or study guidance, advice is not only directed at what to do in later life but also how to plan and organize one's guidance activities
- In career guidance training, the counsellors used the stepwise entry to **activate the student** in planning sequences
 - Question posed to the student activated a certain period of time, the student's response presented ideas or a plan to carry out during that "time slot"
 - The counsellor's third position turn reacted on these plans, either validating them or typically correcting them



- The planning sequence invites the student to be active in their process. Also, the professional treats them as capable and knowledgeable for making their own plans.
- At the same time, the professional gains the possibility to react to their ideas and estimate when they have presented a sufficient or sensible plan
- Thus, the planning sequence is another **balancing tool. The student is treated as active and capable - but professional gains control of the activity & its timing and has a chance to evaluate the student's plans**



Career guidance /Vehviläinen 2001

CO: ...uhm those days will be spent in that. **But there are of course- wait a minute (-) then there is that two week period**

(1.4)

CO: **so what about during that time.**

1st position

:

((talk moves on to another topic))

:

CO: ... but er () **so I mean what can you do () with this rest of the time so you said,**

(3.5)



ST: I must make the rounds one morning () there are at least those ()
locksmiths (0.6) that would be quite an interesting job
(...)

CO : you mean () these "Terhola
(1.8)

2nd position

ST: these you know

CO: Lock" (*(=name of a locksmith business)*)
(1.2)

ST: in Hämeenkatu (*(=name of street)*) there are locksmith shops
between every hundred meters ha ha () so I'll just ask for work then

CO: **I don't think you can ask for work but you could ask
[them**

ST: [no you can't
(0.5)

3rd position

ST: you could - apprenticeship stuff

CO: **yes () and generally one could ask (1.0) I think it would be useful to
find out the kind of training that would be useful in this () (--) I
mean what would be useful if one thinks in terms of the future ...
(*(advice continues)*)**



Lessons from CA studies of advice in guidance

- Excessive problem-solving orientation is prominent in (Finnish) guidance
 - This is not due to any counselling or guidance theory, but rather to institutional practices, routines and expectations
- Professionals recognize this pattern once it is pointed out to them
 - They also strongly oppose the idea that the main essence of guidance would be advice-giving and "service encounter"
 - They also typically express relief that advice is not condemned as such
- They explain their frequent use of problem-solving orientation with time shortage, institutional expectations & client expectations
- They often also feel bad about it 😞
- They often are not quite sure what else to do



- What we do in training:
 - We analyse institutional, interactional and competence-related reasons for the prominence of problem-solving orientation
 - We study all three orientations & practice them
 - I teach what CA tells about well-timed and well-received advice
 - I also point out what I interpret to be the connections between the “overuse” of problem-solving orientation and problematic outcomes of guidance
 - The problem is not relevant or meaningful for the client, it is too preliminary or it is not connected to their core hindrance to agency
 - Over-emphasis of problems that are in the professional’s own comfort zone (“fixable problems”) may lead to overlooking issues of clients with disadvantaged positions
 - I teach them to organise the structure of the guidance encounter so that all orientations have a possibility to emerge
 - I try to help them respect all orientations as potentially useful tools, and relax into the flow of conversation
 - Supportive orientation is not “doing nothing”!



Finding a joint working problem in dyadic counselling: dilemmas of decision-making I

- Thus far: **epistemics**; expert vs. lay perspective
- In terms of client agency: client's perspective should be heard, taken into account and their understandings examined
 - Because their understandings are the gateway to supporting their processes
- **Deontics**; who decides what is to be done?
 - Decision-making: what gets done next, what is done in the encounter



Finding the focus for the work

- Key practice in terms of:
 - **Topical control**: What gets talked about and how it is negotiated
 - **Collaborative nature of guidance talk**: Is the focus shared and “transparent enough”?
 - **Alliance** (=working relationship): What is the meaning of the joint activity, what is at stake, is there trust?

(Cooper & McLeod, 2011; Horvath et al. 2011; Safran, Muran, Stevens & Rothman, 2007; Wampold 2001)
 - **Outcome**: How do participants figure out what is important and especially, what matters to the client?



Summary: Practices that foster collaboration in negotiating about the joint focus

- The professional makes room for client's topics, using
 - Active listening
 - Follow up questions
 - Formulations = "mirroring"
- The professional affiliates with the client (shows empathy, tuned into the client's affect)
- A focus is nominated, and it is observably connected to the client's preceding talk
- A negotiation sequence ensues (Stevanovic 2012)
- What follows actually builds on this negotiated focus
 - This does not always happen! (Tiitinen, Logren, Vehviläinen forthcoming)

We might say this is a way to securing **epistemic and deontic authority to the client**

Vehviläinen & Svinhufvud 2018; Kontunen et al. 2020; Savander et al. 2019; Stevanovic ym. 2018

"Would these be the issues that we can start looking into?"

"Yes that sounds really good"



- When these elements are missing, it may be left unclear
 - whether participants understand each other
 - whether there is a joint focus and whether it has been constructed together
 - whose activities are talked about – who is going to act



A word about formulations

- The **formulation** (=selective summary of other's talk) is perhaps the most researched interactional practice within CA of psychotherapy
(for summaries, see for instance Antaki 2008; W: "eiste & Peräkylä 2013)
- Used also in guidance; the practitioners use the term "**mirroring**" :
"So you say it is a bit like you are always supporting others but never take care of yourself"
- **Formulation is a balancing tool** par excellence
- Using formulations, the material that is owned by the client becomes object for joint work and gets reshaped
- It is a tool for
 - Talk-elicitation
 - Checking and ensuring understanding
 - Demonstrating intent listening; showing that understanding the client matters to the professional
 - Reshaping and reformulating the content of the talk owned by client → tool for shaping the issue towards institutional relevancies

To wrap up:

- There are various kinds of tensions between different discourses of guidance, and tensions experienced by both clients and practitioners → **balancing activities**
- In the Nordic guidance contexts within education and labour market policies, these contradictions seem to be **constitutive of guidance practice**, and guidance practitioners must find ways to deal with them in their practice (Kosonen et al. submitted)
- The balancing issue is relevant in also many other contexts where advice, feedback and help seeking are key practices
 - Helplines – when lay persons are providing help to callers
 - Peer feedback in educational settings
 - Pedagogical settings
- “The educational paradox: how to foster someone’s freedom when they are dependent?”
 - “In order for education to be possible the individual must be free, and simultaneously, in order for the individual to become free education is necessary. Again we face the problem of how the individual can become something that she already is, namely free.” (Uljens 2001)

We can only change what we know and have observed

- Conversation analysis helps to gain a realistic picture of guidance interaction
- Guidance professionals should be aware of this balancing aspect
- **There are alternatives to the strong grasp of advice-giving in the guidance talk** – they can be learned. But first existing practices need to be observed!
- The “balancing” is also a key issue in terms of recognizing concrete ways in which guidance can build social justice -> **becoming aware of the detailed practice by which “institutions talk through us” and making choices about them**

(Vehviläinen & Souto 2021)

■ THANK YOU!



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