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De nieuwe leerder : trendsettende leerbiografieën in een kennissamenleving

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SUMMARY: THE NEW LEARNER

TRENDSETTING LEARNING BIOGRAPHIES IN A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Background

A 'new generation' of young people is heralded in contemporary education innovation and youth sociology discourses. Education innovators proclaim that learning processes of new generations will (have to) be fundamentally different. Youth sociologists especially emphasize today's individualization of life courses. In both cases these changes are perceived as imperative in the shift towards an individualized knowledge society. In such a society self-directed and lifelong learning in several life domains is a crucial factor. So is constructing one's own life course according to one's own considerations by flexibly responding to opportunities. Learning and life course constructing converge to almost synonym processes.

Empirical research, however, that focuses on all aspects of learning and life courses of a new generation is scarce. Moreover, a coherent conceptual framework to grasp these aspects is lacking, partly because 'learning' progressed into a field surveyed by learning theoretical research and educational policy studies, while, at the same time, 'life courses of new generations' matured into an object of study for youth sociology and youth policy.

The *general aim* of this study is to connect (discourses on) learning and life courses. To do so an integrated conceptual framework is developed, using concepts from both discourses, with which learning biographies can be studied. From the generation sociology discourse, additionally, concepts are taken that bring the notion of generation to the fore. The conceptual framework is detailed by entering core conceptions from current education innovation and youth sociology discourses. This results in a framework that functions as a heuristic to focus on a specific kind of learning biographies: trendsetting learning biographies that seem a prototypical fulfilment of a new cultural script as disclosed by the two discourses. The *specific aim* of this study is directed at developing a theoretically informed and empirically underpinned ideal type of a trendsetting learning biography. This learning biography is typified by self-directed and lifelong learning, biographical self-determination and optimal use of the possibilities of a knowledge society. Concentrating on trendsetting learning biographies creates the opportunity to answer the following *central question*: *In what type of contexts do favorable conditions emerge for, and what are key factors in trendsetting learning biographies of a new generation?*

The results of the theoretical exploration

The theoretical exploration of central concepts and notions in the current education innovation discourse yields the ideal type of the 'late modern learner'. The exploration of the youth sociological discourse brings the ideal type of the 'biographical self-determinator' into focus. This results in two ideal typical constructions with which trendsetting learning biographies can be mapped. Both ideal types overlap on a number of key facets.

- The importance of a late modern conception of learning as a lifelong and lifebroad process of self development.
- The importance of a different kind, non-codified knowledge ('soft skills', personal and biographical competences) and other, non-school related contexts to attain such knowledge.
- The emphasis on cooperative learning and learning in 'authentic', real-life contexts.
- The notion of a 'new generation' that is less motivated to engage in school, mainly

because of competition from non-school contexts in which young people can learn for themselves and by more attractive means.

- The notion of learners as active actors.

There are, however, differences between the two ideal types, albeit not very harsh ones. As these are ideal types, the differences between the two discourses are magnified here without taking note of every nuance. The *education innovation discourse*, as its name predicts, regards schooltype learning as its main object.

- Schooltype learning is perceived as still, if not increasingly important: diplomas (at the highest level possible) are believed to be the ultimate gateway for labor market success.
- Next to formal schooltype learning, especially non-formal learning is seen as important: learning in organized, non-school contexts, which cannot replace but can be of additional value to formal learning (so-called interdependence of learning capital).
- Organized, expert-arranged learning contexts are a focal point: besides co-construction between equals, a master-pupil relationship is regarded essential in learning processes of young people.
- Today, learning itself is studied predominantly from a learning psychological perspective with which very specific information on (especially school-related) learning processes is provided: information that is missing in the youth sociological discourse. Learning is seen as a social (that is 'inter-human') process between individuals who differ in personal traits and learning conceptions, thus resulting in different learning behavior and learning outcomes.
- The 'ideal', 'desirable' learner is a learner with a late modern perception of learning who displays constructivist learning behavior, c.q. a meaning-oriented learning style, who plans his/her learning and actively aims for clear goals and clings to a socially (seen from a policy perspective) desirable (that is: prescribed by the transition regime) future orientation.

The *youth sociological* discourse centers at young people and their life courses and places the learner in a biographical perspective with the following consequences.

- A biographical perspective indicates a sociological perspective: youth and life courses are considered social constructions varying in time and by place. A blurring of life phases and an individualization of life courses is noted: education trajectories no longer follow an institutional path, work is not the next logical step anymore after education, life phases do no longer relate to age categories and standardized transitions. In sum, biographical trajectories diversify and incorporate more risks as not a single trajectory includes guarantees for success and security. For this reason, young people regard the 'road to success' presented to them by the transition regime of education and labor market as a 'misleading trajectory'.
- This means that most attention is going to the importance of informal learning contexts and networks, created by young people themselves, in which co-construction and 'youth cultural' learning capital (i.e. learning capital not inspired by older generations) are central.
- Particularly this informal, youth cultural learning capital is observed as a key to biographical success, because it allows young people to find solutions to new problems for which older generations, c.q. formal institutions lack answers, and because it gives them tools for self-determination; success does not really mean 'a thriving trajectory

within the transition regime', but flourishing social participation that is shaped to one's own criteria and that yields a sense of biographical success.

- Sociologization means that the interaction between (perceived) own competences ('agency') and prescribed opportunities ('structure') are central. Individualization of life courses means that young people increasingly want, but also have to construct their life by themselves, although life chances are not equal for all young people. Classic inequalities are at work (related to milieux of origin and gender), but new ones also take effect: young people who do or do not have control of the tools for biographical self-determination and can or cannot cope with new insecurities. A late modern view on learning is essential in this respect: learning does not only mean lifelong and lifebroad learning, but also specifically indicates active control by the individual towards goals that cannot be planned ahead. Taking risks and not planning thus become crucial tools.
- The ideal type of the biographical self-determinator appears in youth sociological discourse as a specific kind of late modern learners: those who take 'unconventional' trajectories, who are 'autonomous learners', who do not aim at the structuring principles of the transition regime, but construct an own biographical project with which they exploit their youth cultural capital in both biographical and societal terms.

The concept of generations provides ways to conceive the trade-off between individual opportunities and the historical-societal context. The 'late modern learner' seems to appear later than the 'biographical self-determinator' as the former has been related to growing adult with information technology (from the 1990s onwards) as opposed to the latter which is associated with growing adult in times of individualizing life courses (from the 1980s onwards). The *generation sociological discourse* connects 'growing up' to the notion of the formative period that roughly runs from fifteenth to twentyfive years of age. The generation location of trendsetters would therefore concern birth cohorts born from the 1960s onwards.

Deduced from the generation sociological discourse is the expectation that the ideal types of both above mentioned discourses can best be understood as generation units who take an avant-garde position in a new generation. Both discourses, as is clear from the above, literally depict an 'ideal', 'desirable' model that will not apply to all members of a new generation: the model of trendsetters who form a prototypical realization of new scripts presented by these two discourses. The desirable image of the education innovation discourse is a societal one as opposed to an emancipatory one of the youth sociological discourse. The latter aligns closely to the Mannheimian meaning of a generation unit: an avant-garde that is the vehicle of social change. In this case, however, it is not so much a political-ideological or artistic avant-garde, but much more a learning elite exploring new learning and working cultures as a response to new opportunities and risks in late modern society.

The empirical approach

The ideal typical constructions developed above are used in the empirical part of this study as heuristic, as 'looking glass' to survey trendsetting learning biographies. An *explorative, qualitative research* approach seemed most appropriate in order to arrive at a 'thick description' of trendsetting learning biographies and thus to answer the central question on favorable constellations and key factors regarding such learning biographies. With this

answer an empirically underpinned ideal type is constructed which combines concepts and notions from the three discourses. A social-constructivist perspective is central to this approach. This means that the research process is regarded as a contextualized construction process between the researcher, peer researchers and respondents with which a new construction, shared by all those involved, of a trendsetting learning biography emerges. This construction is more refined and more 'informed' than the ideal types emerging from the theoretical study.

The *data collection method* consisted of open biographical interviews with a topic list serving as a guide during the interviews. This method fits the purpose of arriving at 'thick' material about learning biographical trajectories, meaning assessments to different life domains and phases, and the dialectics of structure and agency. Fourteen trendsetting learning biographers were selected through a theoretically based data collection and they were traced by the snowball method. The interviews yielded three types of data that were all subject to data-analysis: the lived, the experienced and the told story.

The *data-analysis* entailed a vertical and a horizontal analysis of the interview data. In the vertical analysis the complete transcribed interview of each respondent is central. Three phases were followed, interview after interview. First, close reading of the transcript with which indicators were scored that could indicate the content of an interview fragment. These inductively construed indicators were related to concepts from the theoretical framework. Theoretical reflections with these fragments referred to the 'told story' and its possible theoretical meaning. In methodological reflections ideas for the next phases of data collection were entered (such as 'theoretical sampling', approach to the interviews). Subsequently, the indicators were ordered by concept resulting in an indicator profile of the respondent for each concept. This profile was the basis for the third phase: writing a portrait of the respondent that is included in this study to allow the reader to get an impression of each single respondent. Moreover, this profile, together with the theoretical reflections, forms the basis of the horizontal analysis in which the inter-respondent comparison is central. Four phases were followed. In the first phase the indicators of a new respondent were compared – interview after interview – with the ones of (a) previous respondent(s), findings were held against the notions from the conceptual framework and specific theories (and other sources of inspiration) were searched to frame the findings. In the second phase an overall analysis was conducted based on the research questions, and the indicators for each concept were compared for all respondents. The core material was a data matrix containing the indicator profiles (transferred from 'thick' to 'generalized') of all respondents. In the third phase validation was central. The final findings from the overall analysis were confronted with the key notions of the conceptual framework and (if necessary new) theoretical notions were used to interpret the findings. These findings were, furthermore, discussed with the supervisor of this study, research colleagues and the respondents themselves. The fourth phase consisted of reporting on the outcomes of this second and third phase of the horizontal analysis with which, finally, the empirical questions could be answered.

Different instruments are employed to guarantee the *quality of the study*. Reasoning from a social-constructivist position validation of the study concurs with the 'credibility' of the study. A first condition is that the study is reliable. Reliability in this perception means checkable. Reporting on all steps of the research process in a process report aimed to satisfy this condition. In this case we deal with an explorative study with parallel running phases of phrasing the research questions, data collection and data analysis. Meticulous

recording of how and why which respondents were traced was part of the data collection, as was the recording of the course of the interviews. Doing so, allowed a reflection on the procedures and outcomes of the first-encounter action, the introduction of the interview, the reflection on the story-telling situation and the feedback to the respondent. Moreover, the steps in the data-analysis described above were carefully recorded. A second condition is that respondents should be able to identify with the results. Use is made of 'communicative' validation instruments: reflection on the interview, recurrent contact, member check of the data and member debriefing of the results. Finally, to make the findings plausible for the public the analysis process is revealed, intra-researcher triangulation is used in the analysis, and interview fragments and theoretical explanatory notions are introduced in the reporting on the outcomes.

The results of the empirical study

The concepts central to the education innovation, youth sociological and generation sociological discourses, outlined in the theoretical study, are connected in and by the explorative research resulting in an integrated framework that, in turn, guided the data analysis. This integrated framework can also be further explored in subsequent studies on (different types of) learning biographies.

framework of analysis learning biographies
structural level: contexts and trajectories
<p>1) <i>Context of the learning biography</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic-societal context: transition regime (script and institutions) within the generation location, the importance of generation as an actuality and generation unit • Social and local structuring: (interaction between) milieux of origin (structural features and style of upbringing), gender, and features of the social-locally structured networks (interdependency)
<p>2) <i>Features of the learning biographical trajectory (endogenous structuring/path dependency)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education trajectory (formal learning trajectory) • Non-school learning trajectory in organized and unorganized leisure (non- and informal learning trajectory) • Non-school learning trajectory in work • Trajectory and nature of network development
subjective level: experiences and orientations
<p>3) <i>Meaning of learning</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning given to education • Meaning given to own learning behavior (information collection and processing) • Meaning given to learning results and definition of acquired learning capital • Meaning given to function and nature of networks
<p>4) <i>Meaning of life domains and phases</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaning given to learning in general • Meaning given to work and leisure • Meaning given to future and adulthood • Evaluation of the own biography
<p>5) <i>Typification of personal competences</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-typification • Coping strategies

With this framework the *favorable constellations and key factors for trendsetting learning biographies* (the central question) came to the fore.

- The findings show that key factors (i.e., factors shared by all trendsetters) in trendsetting learning biographies seem not traceable in the education domain. At most ‘some years of higher education’ do form a condition. Education trajectories up until the secondary school were rather mainstream, after that they divert more and more. Learning conceptions and behaviors in the education domain varied strongly as well.
- The path towards a trendsetting learning biography seemed to be two-folded: trendsetters who combine school and non-school learning capital versus those who exploit mainly non-school capital. Trendsetters, therefore, are at least ‘non-school late modern learners’.
- In both tracks flexible, constructivist non-school learning behavior and the construction of informal, youth cultural learning capital that is related to knowledge society are essential.
- The latter goes also for late modern biographical orientations focused on lifelong and lifebroad learning. These orientations take a specific connotation: hedonistic exploration and a permanent quest for authentic challenges without a longterm planning, without an end goal, and without establishing long formal obligations. These orientations furthermore are integrated in an holistic life concept that matches the concept of self.
- The above mentioned youth cultural capital and biographical orientations develop in self-construed, cosmopolitan networks consisting of weak ties with like-minded peers and members of older generations. These networks provide trendsetters with a large potential of new knowledge and acquaintances and at the same time ensure an autonomous position enabling them to combine the best from the different networks. Furthermore, like-minded soulmates are an essential source of support.
- In their networks trendsetters transform youth cultural capital into work trajectories that align with their biographical orientations: paid projects that are pursued in self-construed, network-like work structures and that require combinations of, for instance, disciplines, materials, and cultures.
- Finally, trendsetters recognize the importance of their networks as a ‘backup’, matching their risk society-like coping style: keeping options open, not planning, taking risks, placing themselves in a ‘network of opportunities’, making themselves visible, using their networks, responding to seemingly coincidental opportunities (instead of focusing on choosing a well-defined longterm and rigid planning), making reversible shortterm choices (as a means to explore some things new), continuously monitoring the fit of their action with ‘their core self’, being self-confident. This coping style can also be described as the competence of biographicity.

The key factors only seem conceivable in an individualized knowledge society allowing both a playing field for new, creative, and knowledge-intensive professions as well as longer experimentation time giving margin to the exploration of a large amount of choice opportunities. An individualized society, furthermore, that enables dis-embedding from prescribed paths associated to social categories, geographical location, and institutions. Trendsetters are from the traditionally ‘favorable’ higher cultural milieux of origin or succeed in parting from lower milieux by, among other things, using the institution of education to arrive at biographical self-determination. The same goes for women who

succeed in overcoming their gender specific socialization. Yet, the milieux of origin and gender leave subtle (albeit hardly very crucial) traces in the habitus of all trendsetters. Trendsetters, furthermore, grow up in a cosmopolitan geographical location or wittingly leave their original surroundings for this type of location. They also seem not to be determined by institutional logic. They use institutions in combination with their self-constructed youth cultural capital as long and as far as these are biographically relevant for shaping their own authentic life project. In this sense they optimally use the opportunities for biographical self-determination offered by the individualized knowledge society.

In sum: coming from different milieux and education trajectories, male and female trendsetters start to resemble each other as their non-school learning, youth cultural capital, work and networks, and their biographical orientations and self-concept converge. This makes trendsetters visible as a specific group within a new generation whose members grow up at least since the 1980s: a new generation unit that explores new learning and working cultures.

In and by the empirical study it was explored which notions were usable to define trend-setting learning biographies of a new generation, how notions could be refined, complemented each other or even provided insufficient information, thus necessitating a quest for supplementary notions.

The notions of the *education innovation discourse* – summarized in the ideal type of the late modern learner – appeared suitable to interpret the results on trendsetters. Very suitable are the specific notions with which learning conceptions and behaviors could be interpreted. With especially these notions the discourse complements the discourse of sociology. It allowed, in particular, to focus more on formal learning by which a large variety among trendsetters within the educational domain became visible.

Not all notions of this discourse were, however, appropriate for the trendsetters. Some notions should at least be refined. Not all the education trajectories of trendsetters are, in contrast to the predictions of the discourse, very long, but vary strongly in both length and nature. Although not all trendsetters formally attain a high level of education (finished with a diploma), they do all enjoy a period of higher education (as the discourse upholds). In line with the discourse the experience of education associates with formal learning behavior and formal learning results. Yet, not all trendsetters display the predicted experiences. For some, education has had a predominantly instrumental meaning: they perceived 'school' as something they just had to endure and they demonstrated reproduction-directed orientations and behaviors. Others combined a social orientation with a largely undirected learning style, and yet others combined a development-directed, constructivist orientation with a meaning-oriented learning style. Learning conceptions and learning behaviors do not unequivocally associate with educational success. Surprisingly, the development-directed attitude that is celebrated in the education innovation discourse generated the most educational problems. Trendsetters abandoning education all had a development-directed educational orientation. However, not all trendsetters with such an orientation abandoned school. The lack of social ties with class mates and having paid work – especially when redeeming their passions in paid work – are decisive for parting from the education trajectory.

Attending higher education for some period seems conditional, but the large variation within the educational domain shows that results in this domain cannot be a decisive fac-

tor for trendsetting learning biographies. Rightly so, it is argued in the discourse that one should take all learning trajectories (education and non-school) into account. Doing so, shows that the trajectories of trendsetters are – in line with the discourse – varied, individualized, lifelong and lifebroad. The notion of the discourse that ultimately the diploma determines the course of a learning biography seems, however, unjustified. For a large number of trendsetters non-school learning capital is a clear counterbalance. This capital is not similar to non-formal learning capital, as the discourse claims to be of importance, but equals a large amount and specific kind of (informal) youth cultural learning capital. The opportunities to acquire and redeem this type of learning capital closely align with the general learning conceptions, learning behaviors and coping strategies of trendsetters. Trendsetters are not all ‘late modern’ school learners, but they are all ‘late modern’ non-school learners. Learning outcomes in general are equaled to ‘soft skills’ and learning itself is associated with identity development. Learning is seen as a lifelong and lifebroad process, not connected to ‘Bildung’ or career, however, but to hedonistic exploration. In informal and voluntary contexts all trendsetters indeed display a development-directed orientation, a meaning-oriented processing strategy, and a pragmatic information collecting strategy. Given the latter they are (in line with the notion) truly zapping, bricolage learners: a strategy they, however, employed well before the rise of Internet; a strategy, therefore, that did not emerge because of Internet use, as the discourse suggests.

General personality traits seem important in the learning biography of trendsetters, however, not all in line with the notions. Trendsetters do typify themselves with characteristics that refer to elements of the ‘Big Five’ personality traits that are prevalent in the (learning psychological) education innovation discourse. The characteristics, however, are not uniquely identifiable and do not appear to associate to learning behavior in education. There seems to be a relationship, by contrast, between personality traits and non-school learning behavior. The same holds for behavioral control mechanisms regarded essential in the discourse. Strict planning and working on one’s future, aspects considered highly important in the discourse, are rejected by trendsetters as unfeasible strategies. Self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, responding adequately to setbacks, are elements that trendsetters think are important, but outside education. Again, they frame equal characteristics, although they did not display equal schooltype learning behaviors.

Finally, trendsetters clarify that attaining and redeeming informal learning capital is possible only because they have the right, self-constructed networks and can cater to developments in the historic-societal context. The education innovation discourse has no or hardly any attention for the importance of such networks and social contexts.

The *youth and life course sociological discourse* – summarized in the ideal type of the ‘biographical self-determinator’ – is valuable, especially because the biographization of the learner is a central issue and many notions are offered to interpret key factors in trendsetting learning biographies that are situated outside the education domain: the importance of informal, youth cultural capital, late modern biographical orientations that converge into a life concept, self-constructed, informal networks, and coping strategies that consist of non-strict planning but taking risks, ‘just’ trying things out and avoiding a longterm and standard-biographical perspective. Furthermore, the discourse emphasizes identity as a life story that continuously is amended and in which ‘authenticity’ is a crucial lead. In doing so, it focuses attention to the subtle interaction of agency and structure. Because of these non-educational domain related notions, this discourse is an important complement to

the education innovation discourse. While most youth sociological notions were applicable, a number of refinements are necessary.

It is clear from the findings that a total individualization process at the onset of the biography is not likely. Up to the secondary school age traditional social inequalities in the non-school domain and institutional forces of the educational system in the school domain remain important. Moreover, as stated, the milieux of origin and gender maintain subtle impacts on the learning biographies. Geographical location is and remains an essential factor too: the importance of (moving to) a cosmopolitan, larger city environment is underestimated in the discourse.

The whole life courses of the trendsetters are strongly destandardized, but not all trendsetters experienced destandardized, unconventional education trajectories. This relates to the 'use' of the institution of education for as long as this is relevant for their biography. Here variation along milieux and gender lines is relevant: for lower milieux and female trendsetters education seems meaningful. In line with the notions, the informal track is a separate but invaluable pathway to biographical success: youth cultural capital always is the driving force behind work trajectories and sometimes a supplement, sometimes a compensation for formal learning capital. The latter is, however, not a radical issue as all trendsetters have at least spent some period in higher education. The value of higher education for groups with favorable life chances is, compared to the education innovation discourse, not strongly researched in the youth sociological discourse (which directs its effort more on the less fortunate). Without the notions of the education innovation discourse the variation in school experiences and schooltype learning behavior might well have been underestimated: the youth sociological discourse unjustifiably assumes a larger share of unity in this respect.

An important refinement relates to the general assumption (also visible in the education innovation discourse) that new generations predominantly (want to) learn more from each other than from teachers. In defiance of the youth sociological message, trendsetters acknowledge the value of master-pupil relationships (as is stressed in the education innovation discourse), be it that they note, in line with the youth sociological discourse, that such relationships are valuable only if the 'master' is passionate and the relationship is informal, chosen voluntarily and based on a human-to-human logic. The latter also holds for cooperation with age contemporaries: the issue is not that they do or do not want to learn from older or equally aged people, but the issue is an appropriate setting and content of the relationship.

Finally, youth sociological discourse did hardly yield specific information to interpret larger-city based network developments and experiences of trendsetters. Network and social capital theories and 'urban studies' provided useful notions that helped specify the youth sociological notions on networks.

The *generation sociological discourse* provided clues to interpret the concept of a 'new generation'. It enabled the distinction between generation location, generation as an actuality, and generation unit with which findings could be interpreted much more specifically. It is shown that the generation location of the 'new generation' is less strictly related to the emergence of Internet (as the education innovation discourse claims), but much more to broader structural social developments: a context in which new professions rise that are not yet institutionalized and in which a large amount of choice opportunities and a long period of experimentation exist. A refinement of the discourse is that generation con-

sciousness (related to generation as an actuality) does not coincide with collectivization and ideologization. The Mannheimian notion of the formative period, in turn, is open to debate as trendsetters extend this period far beyond the supposed age limit. The youth sociological discourse shows that as a result of the lengthening and blurring of life phases, a strictly defined formative period has become an obsolete concept. The concept of generation unit is very appropriate to pinpoint trendsetters as a new generation, although an adaptation is necessary. It does not refer to an artistic-political avant-garde whose members offer new solutions to social problems through organized action, but much more to a heterogeneous (in terms of origin and gender) life style group whose members experiment with new learning and working cultures and who latently, in and through their work, comment on society's course.

Towards further integration and theoretical comments

The three discourses are valuable, precisely because they are complementary in some respects. The question is, all and all, what the central linking elements of the three discourses are.

The concept that is the pivotal point is the container concept of 'learning biography', a concept that can bridge all three discourses. The concept 'trendsetter' adds another linking pin to this concept. This concept is used in the sense of 'prototypical realization' of a new cultural script presented by the education innovation and youth sociological discourses and is referring to the consequences of the transition towards an individualized knowledge society. This 'script' is the theoretical fundament of the bridge connecting the discourses.

Besides this commonly shared 'script', the research findings themselves generate a connective element between the three discourses. Trendsetters demonstrate this latent 'script' in their learning biographies: they clearly display the key factors required to 'survive' successfully in a late modern society. When listening to their biographical accounts and when perceiving these accounts as a 'narrative', the question about a plot or storyline arises: what linkage do they create in their life stories, what is the main thread or the connective element? Phrased in terms of the 'grounded theory' approach: what are the core concepts that underpin all findings? The plot emerging from the stories is a holistic late modern life and self concept that is lived in a life style. The life concept and life style are the empirical focal concepts with which all concepts of the three discourses can be connected and can be specified with content relevant to trendsetters.

Hedonistic exploration, attempting something without knowing the results, without having an end goal itself, challenge, informality, autarky, passion, the new creative, authentic idea by combining perceptions from formerly separated worlds, are the core indicators of this life concept. Across the board, this storyline takes two courses: 'I want to live my passion and create something new that has an impact' vis-à-vis 'I have no specific passion, but respond to opportunities that arouse my curiosity at that moment'.

The core indicators of their life style are not so much confined to a specific consumer pattern or to style characteristics, but draw on a new learning and working culture that aligns with the life concept and with which they in and through their work contribute to social change. They not only 'consume' authentic experiences of the 'Erlebnissesellschaft', but are also the producers of these type of experiences that they do not just focus on the leisure domain, but on all life domains and phases. This is also the reason why this life style group is closely connected to a cosmopolitan environment: this

is where most options and like-minded people are and where ‘niches’ can be found in which relationships between producers and consumers are closely knit.

Taking the focus away from integration of the three discourses (the general goal of this study) and looking more closely to theory building on learning biographies and trendsetting learning biographies in particular (the specific goal of this study), then the main comment is that a learning biography is such a catch-all concept that its interpretation necessitates a large amount of concepts and notions. Each of these concepts in fact has its own specific theoretical tradition and debates; traditions that are part of the three discourses, but can also be found far beyond these discourses. For instance, social capital and network traditions, ‘urban studies’ and maybe also career research can provide relevant additions. Within the framework of this explorative study, these traditions could not be explored to all depths. Possibly very different traditions, for instance those in gender studies, may also contribute favorably to the theoretical meaning of the framework for studying learning biographies and to the newly developed ideal type of trendsetting learning biographies.

Methodological comments and towards subsequent research

Exploring and attaining a rich conception of trendsetting learning biographies in order to construct an empirically underpinned ideal type, required a qualitative in-depth study. Therefore, a number of questions could not be answered.

- Are the results representative for similar biographies among other groups and societies? (International) Comparative research is necessary to answer this question.
- Do trendsetting learning biographies last during the life course? Only longitudinal research can answer this question and is, moreover, the only way to disentangle generation, period and life course effects. It seems desirable to survey learners from a young age onwards in order to counterbalance the disadvantages of retrospective research.
- Do trendsetting learning biographies last over generations? Related is the question on whether the concept of ‘trendsetting’ can be applied to a large group that will follow them. Recurring studies among new cohorts are therefore advisable.
- What other types of learning biographies do exist besides trendsetting learning biographies? Representative research of people in their twenties and thirties can show which different types of learning biographies can be discerned and what relationship there is between a particular type of learning biography and social and biographical success.

Final remarks

This study shows that the biography is the key towards understanding an individual’s learning process and the starting point to learning for learners themselves. Not only theory predicted this, but also the interviews proved this: the respondents considered the interviews as very valuable and even as a learning experience. Furthermore, this study clarifies that the individualization of life courses means that it becomes crucial to not only recognize but also to actively shape one’s own biographical trajectories and orientations. Orientations and trajectories that develop in typical historic-societal and local circumstances and therefore require consciousness of these very same circumstances.

It cannot be expected that education is confronted with a new generation that is homogeneous in its learning biographical characteristics and orientations. If this would be the

case, this would downplay and camouflage (new) inequalities. Education with its present and coming innovations is confronted with two questions that are perhaps difficult to reconcile. How should education accommodate young people who have the characteristics of a trendsetting learning biography? How should education accommodate young people who do not have these characteristics and because of this might miss the connection to social change, thus continuing old inequalities and creating new ones? For these young people education has the double task to gear to their biographical orientations and in the same time to provide them the means for full social participation and feelings of biographical success.

The plea to bring the biographical dimension in education is also a plea to connect the youth and life course sociology discourse to the education innovation discourse. This study shows that learning conceptions and learning behavior can only be understood in the context of an individual's biographical development that is embedded in the subtle interaction between historic-societal and social-local circumstances and individual agency opportunities. Not only the learning psychological, but particularly the sociological perspective provides learners a prospect to identify their own agency opportunities with which they can develop tools for biographical self-determination. Tools that are becoming increasingly important for a successful participation in a riskful knowledge society.