

# Career guidance on the move: Developing guidance in new places

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**This** article is about how the notion of place can be used in an analysis of career guidance practices and their development. It is about how a focus on the context of career guidance can develop an awareness of the place where guidance is practiced and support the development of career guidance in new places. In this article I introduce an analytical perspective on place; I give the example of the guidance café a practice development that took place into serious consideration because it was an attempt to develop career guidance practice through relocating it.



## Introduction

Once one begins interrogating the power of place as a construct for analysis, one sees that it might be, and increasingly is, applied constructively to any realm of human experience or inquiry. (Gruenewald 2003:636)

There has been little writing about the geographical context of career guidance and the physical place in which career guidance takes place in career guidance theories or career guidance research. McLeod and Machin (1998) write that 'contextual factors have largely been ignored in counseling theory, research and practice.' They advocate the importance of research into this topic and the inclusion of contextual considerations in guidance practices. McLeod and Mahin (1998) describe the contextual factors influencing counseling as: The immediate physical and material environment, the culture and climate of the organisation, the relationship between the counselling agency and its institutional and community environment and the general social and cultural factors. Stead et al (2012) conclude on their

content analysis of qualitative research in career development that: 'The locations of data collection were broken down as follows: educational institution (32.8%), participant workplace (9.0%), home (3.0%), community center (1.1%), and other location (16.0%). Most striking was the finding that location was not mentioned in 38.1% of the studies.' (Stead et al, 2012:115) According to Stead et al a great deal of the researchers did not clearly disclose the locations and places where they conducted their studies on career development. These observations are the point of departure for this article which will focus on the physical place of career guidance and how this affects practice.

From 2005 to 2009 I undertook a study on career guidance as part of a doctoral study. I chose to investigate career guidance from a participant perspective as I wanted to understand how participants in career guidance came to make meaning of their participation in career guidance in their everyday lives. Since my aim was to study career guidance from the perspective of participants this would only be possible if I could be present in places where career guidance was practiced alongside people's lives. I chose two settings: one was a factory that was closing down its production and had commissioned a career guidance practitioner to establish a 'career guidance corner' to support the workers transition to other jobs or further training. The second setting was a folk high school. I also knew that taking part in career guidance was obligatory for students in the Danish folk high schools<sup>1</sup> (Højskole)

<sup>1</sup> Folk high schools are residential schools providing general and nonformal education. The length of the courses they offer courses vary – from one week to up to almost a year – and are attended by adults of all ages. The topics vary from politics to sports. The courses are nonqualifying courses which are meant to broaden general, social and democratic competencies.

and that career guidance in the folk high schools previously was described as a 'career guidance space' (Kofoed 2004 : 47), which led me to expect that I could study alternative modes of delivery at the folk high school.

Across the two places there were similarities as well as differences. The similarities were that neither the workers nor the folk high school students were pursuing the opportunity to get individual career guidance sessions. Both the workers and the folk high school students valued career guidance where it was available at all times as an informal practice. Thomsen (2012) describes this as career guidance in communities where career guidance is seen as a collective phenomenon that makes it possible to adopt a variety of participant positions such as listening, hearing and seeing the answers given to other people, getting ideas for your own questions, offering solutions or raising problems, getting a peer perspective on a matter, continuing the conversation later with others who have also heard what has been said (Thomsen, 2012: 217). In both places the flexibility of career guidance practice together with the use of the specific places where it was practiced played a significant role in how career guidance came to be a meaningful to the everyday lives of the workers and high school students.

My interest in the notion of place was not there from the beginning of my study, it came alongside my field work in the two places. I came to understand that the place where career guidance was practiced mattered and that I needed concepts of place to describe and analyse and understand guidance practices from the perspectives of participants. Since my theoretical background was mainly informed by (social) psychology I would often read studies that seemed to be de-contextualised (see below) or I would use the word context to describe the surroundings of practice. I felt curious about other concepts for understanding how place influences practice since places are more physical than context. Places have a concrete geographical location, sometimes they have buildings, places in buildings have furniture, sometimes tools or art, windows, plants etc. and places have uses sometimes specific sometimes not.

## Conceptualisation of context and place

Danish psychologist Ole Dreier argues that: '... *psychotherapy* is often practiced and presented as if it took place in a vacuum or in a strange, *privileged idealised space* with no connection to an objective social world. It is perceived as if it could occur anywhere and nowhere. The dominant perceptions of therapy are *decontextualised*. They are based on the implicit assumption that the concrete context is not important, that it has no influence on what takes place there' (Dreier, 1993:25, emphasis in the original). Could it be that this line of thinking not only counts for psychotherapy but is also a way of perceiving career guidance practices? If so, this could explain why qualitative researchers, according to Stead et.al (2012) give little or no information about the places in which the guidance they researched was practiced?

The geographer Edward Casey argues that: 'Places are not just empty localities. Places are full of things and inhabited by people and actions (...) places gather things in their midst – where 'things' connote various animate and inanimate entities. Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts.' (Casey, 1996:24)

Edward Casey explores places from a phenomenological perspective and emphasises that a place is much more than a physical location because places attract things, memories, expectations etc. He even goes so far as to say that: 'A place has its own 'operative intentionality' that elicits and responds to the corporeal intentionality of the perceiving subject. Thus place integrates with body as much as body with place' (Casey, 1996, p. 22).

## Recognition of place in policy on career guidance

When the Act on Guidance was passed in 2003 career guidance for young people in Denmark was centralised in two types of career guidance centre: firstly; in 50 Youth Guidance Centres, where the practice discussed in this article was based; and secondly, in seven Regional Guidance Centres. The career guidance in

folk high schools was kept out of this centralisation and retained the right to practice career guidance in the school. Two main reasons were given: 1) the folk high school's focus on liberal education and existential development; and 2) the students live at the school and so the school provides a learning space for the students to try out different interests. The reform made it obligatory for the folk high schools to offer career guidance to their students.

This implicitly reveals recognition of the folk high schools as places that can contribute positively to the goals of career guidance. If this had not been the case, the folk high school students should go to one of the seven Regional Guidance Centres for career guidance as it is the case for all other young people in Denmark. I take this as an example of an implicit recognition of the importance of place in the policymaking process.

Place also seemed to matter in different ways in relation to career guidance in the company. In the company the career guidance practitioner was commissioned to establish a career guidance corner. A guidance corner is a workplace-based career guidance approach, where a career guidance counsellor travels to a company and offers person-to-person guidance in a corner of a workplace assembly room, using pamphlets about education or training and with a portable computer containing guidance and information programmes (Turner and Plant 2005). The concept of 'guidance corners' were introduced in the 1990s by the then Women's Workers Union<sup>2</sup> in Denmark to introduce career guidance into the workplace. Because the members were paid by the hour, many of them did not find it possible to travel to the Union Office for guidance on training and educational issues. By establishing guidance corners in the workplace, The Women's Workers Union in Denmark developed a new way of organising career guidance – a way that took the influence of the place into consideration in a way that resulted in a change of place for practice.

One could argue that for both career guidance in the

folk high school and in the work-place it is recognised that:

- The place where guidance is practiced plays a significant role – otherwise it would not have been important to either keep it in a certain place (the folk high school) or change it to a new place (the factory).
- Making career guidance available at places where people are already present for other reasons makes career guidance available to more people
- Career guidance can benefit from the social spaces in the place where it is present.

Casey's remark about places having an 'operative intentionality', moreover, draws our attention to the challenges of relocating guidance practices. In fact, relocation may change the practice so that career guidance practiced in new places offers new possibilities and restraints. Thus it would also be possible to use relocation as a driver for change of guidance practices. This next case happened like that. A career guidance practitioner was inspired by discussions on the influence and meaning of place as it is discussed in Thomsen (2012). She decided to move her practice to a new place; the following case gives an insight into her reasons for doing so and what challenges and benefits she experienced.

## A case for consideration: The guidance café<sup>3</sup>

A youth guidance center was struggling with getting a specific group of young people to attend career guidance activities. Some activities are obligatory if you are a Danish resident under the age of 25 and not in education or training (NEET). Some individuals amongst the NEET group, especially young men from minority ethnic groups, did not pay much attention to career guidance even though the guidance practitioner tried reaching out to them in different ways. She

<sup>2</sup> Women's Workers Union (Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund) was a trade union for Women. In 2005 the Women's Workers Union merged with the special workers union and formed 3F (United Federation of Danish Workers). The largest trade union in Denmark.

<sup>3</sup> Career guidance practitioner Camilla Sneum from UU-Øresund has provided material for this case description. The material stems from a project she invented, carried out and described. The case also figures in (Thomsen et.al, 2013).

found out that in the combined community center and library in the Vapnagaard area where most of the young men lived there was a popular afterschool initiative called the Homework Café. She talked to different people and got permission to establish a career guidance café alongside the Homework Café but in the community center next to the library. The purpose was manifold:

- to make contact with and provide guidance to 18 to 25 year olds who live in Vapnagaard and who were not in education or training;
- to advertise the youth guidance center to Vapnagaards residents; and
- to find out whether the youth guidance center should allocate resources to career guidance in other places for instance in other residential areas.

Prior to the establishment of the guidance café the guidance practitioner contacted a number of young people she knew through prior guidance activities. The young people she asked were all living in Vapnagaard and already enrolled in different educational institutions. She asked them to come by the guidance café and to bring a friend they thought might benefit from meeting her. She also asked them if they would be willing to speak about their educational choices as part of the café. She did so to be sure that somebody would attend the café the first couple of times she was there.

During the career guidance café the guidance practitioner asked the young people who came to see her how they found out about the initiative. Some came because they were invited by the guidance practitioner in the same way she would invite them for activities in the Youth Guidance Center. Others came because they were invited by other professionals who knew about the new guidance initiative or by the volunteers from the adjacent library who were in charge of the popular homework café and knew the young people through that. Some young people had heard about the café through a friend, some had read about the guidance café in the local newspaper and others came because they saw that something was happening, when they were taking part in the homework café in the library or just passing by. The young people that came were mostly young men from

minority ethnic groups, young mothers and young girls from minority ethnic groups who were looking for supplementary guidance on further education.

## Experimenting with career guidance in new places

The career guidance practitioner explained to me that the guidance café allowed for her to experience the young people in their own community and in their own place which gave her a more nuanced picture of them and their lives. She explained that now she was the visitor and on foreign ground. She said she felt that these experiences would allow her to develop and offer guidance activities they would perceive as meaningful for them. And she could feed back to the Youth Guidance Center which topics might be relevant in group guidance sessions. In addition she made contact with other professionals and volunteers around this group of young people and found that the professionals from different professions together could support the young people in gaining education or training. The guidance practitioner's overall reflection on her experience with the career guidance café was that by being present in the community center she gained new opportunities to get in touch with the young people in Vapnagaard. She also discovered that her presence affected the young people who participated in the café and the community's perception of both career guidance and of dropping out of an education. She explained that the understanding of dropping-out changed from 'a failure to an experience that can be used in the next step of the education journey'.

The practitioner's decision to set up career guidance activities in the community center reflects recognition of the impact different physical places can have on guidance practices. It also shows that place as a contextual factor not only influences career guidance practice, it is also possible for career guidance to influence contextual factors in this case the community's perception of drop-out and of career guidance.

The change of place challenged the practitioner in different aspects. She was challenged on the use of her

resources because different people were interested in the information and the support she as a career guidance practitioner could offer. The girls who came to see her about further education were not in her target group, the Regional Guidance Centers were where they should have taken their questions and considerations. The volunteers in the career guidance café also came to see her, but they should have sought help from the Adult Education Centers and the Public Employment Service. The practitioner was relaxed about this but raised it as a problem related to the organisation of the Danish system for career guidance which was accentuated because career guidance was now available in the community.

## Conclusion

What can be learned from this case study about the role of place? I should like to return to the quote from Grunewald that started this article and specifically Grunewald's point about *selfhood and placehood as intertwined*. By moving career guidance to the residential area of the young people the career guidance practitioner was trying to reach out to the young people there. They could have continued to not take part in career guidance, but instead career guidance was adopted as a valuable practice which contributed to a change in the communities understanding of dropping-out of education. When the career guidance practitioner made an effort to establish a career guidance café in the community centre it seems likely that she made an important contribution to a new understanding of selfhood there. Before they considered dropping out of education as a failure. The new understanding of dropping out might be phrased like this: 'We can also benefit from guidance, we haven't left education for good, we are expected to return to education and there is someone here to help us find out how'.

If placehood and selfhood are intertwined, career guidance being present in a certain place will affect the people who reside there and, in turn, the way they think about themselves. I argue that research in career guidance as well as the practice of career guidance can benefit from a more placebound or topographic approach (Hastrup 2005) that allows for guidance to

be delivered and investigated where people are and where they live. The case study shows that moving out and developing new ways of practicing guidance in a new place have wider consequences than changing citizens' sense of selfhood. The practitioner in the case study was widening access by reaching out to a disadvantaged group and widening access by adding a new location to her service. Both out-reach and location are emphasised by the ELGPN as important for widening access to career guidance (ELGPN 2010). Because this practitioner was from a youth guidance center she was especially focused on reaching out to young people but she experienced that because she was present in a central place in the community the opportunity for information and support became visible to different groups who was at that place. Young people seeking advice about further education and adults who were volunteers at the homework café nearby reached out to get career guidance – this indicates that the issue of widening access through offering career guidance in new places is as relevant to other groups in society.

This issue of the NICEC Journal introduces interesting discussions on different aspects of place and community. Yet it is also clear that there is much more to be said, discussed and known about the importance of place in career and career guidance. My belief is that place is a concept that can be applied in analyses of career guidance practices, and can be considered as a source for developing career guidance and widening access.



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