The flip side: Career guidance policies and social control

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Career guidance in most European countries is increasingly an area of policy interest. Not so much with a focus on guidance itself, but more preoccupied with other policy areas in which career guidance may have a role to play: employment, education, social inclusion, gender equality, and economic development, just to mention a few. This mirrors a strong policy focus on the role of guidance as a soft societal steering instrument. This poses dilemmas in relation to the delicate balance between guidance as an instrument for personal development, and guidance as social control.

Introduction

According to the 2004 EU Resolution on Lifelong Guidance, which has been adopted by EU member states, guidance refers to:

> A range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used. (EU, 2004)

In this Resolution, guidance activities include: information and advice giving, counselling, competence assessment, mentoring, advocacy, teaching decision-making, and career management skills.

> There is a clear consensus in Europe that high quality guidance and counselling services play a key role in supporting lifelong learning, career management and achievement of personal goals. (CEDEFOP, 2009, p. 1)

This consensus has had a significant impact on policy-making and practice in this area, as policy efforts and increased resources, over the last decade, have been focused on establishing a coherent system for guidance and counselling for young people. Adult guidance is still somewhat fragmented in most European countries. Thus, educational/vocational/career guidance has attracted increasing political attention over the past few years. This has had positive effects in terms of e.g. professionalisation of guidance in most European countries (CEDEFOP, 2009). But this policy focus also has a darker side which has had less attention: social control aspects have occurred as a result of this process, as discussed by Plant & Thomsen (2012). It is to these issues that we now turn, with some examples from our home country, Denmark.

Obligation

The etymological meaning of the Danish word 'vejledning' is 'leading someone on the way'. In 2003, the Act on Guidance established how guidance counsellors should lead young people on the way to what is considered mainstream normality, where participation in social life takes place through work and/or education. This is part of the social contract in a welfare state such as Denmark. In a societal and governmentality perspective, guidance can be viewed as one of the soft steering mechanisms of society: through guidance, people will make choices that will meet the interest of both themselves as individuals, and of the society, i.e. in practice, the labour market. This, however, leaves little room for alternative choices, and the social control aspect is evident, which became abundantly clear in a recent legislative

initiative, known as the Youth Packages from 2010 and onwards, on youth education and employment. They established an obligation to stay in education or work on the basis of both incentives and economic social welfare sanctions directed towards young people. This showed a profound difference in relation to other Nordic countries: whereas Norway and Iceland have established young people's right to education (and guidance), the government (2001-2011) of Denmark chose to establish this as an obligation. Such issues are far from being matters of rhetoric, as there are fundamental differences between holding the right to a good or being obliged to make specific choices at certain points in your life. This places guidance in an intricate social control role (Plant, 2010), policing the borders of societal normalization. Thus, guidance in this picture takes the form of social control, disguised as a helping hand in a velvet glove (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). This is an impasse: it locks guidance to the role of preserving a societal status quo situation, where the opposite is badly needed in the present time of profound economic, social, and ecological changes and challenges. But such social control and status quo policies are disguised under the veil of 'prioritising'.

Prioritising

In some cases, prioritising guidance is taken to its excesses. Again, Denmark is an extreme example. Here, the main target group for youth guidance is youth who have difficulties with choosing or completing education or occupation. The above-mentioned EU Resolution on Lifelong guidance (EU, 2004), however, states that guidance is for all citizens throughout life, with a particular focus on those who are in risk of marginalization. The centrality of the citizen is the focal point. This raises the question of the balance between the two: is guidance for all, or is guidance re reserved for those in a societal risk group? The Danish case tips the balance: 80% of youth need no further/personal guidance, as they can use the internet. This is the official position. But there is a difference between focusing on those with particular guidance needs within the framework of a general guidance offer on the one hand, and, on the other, to select and thus stigmatize a particular societal group, who in practice cannot reject this guidance offer. Moreover, it is still unclear who these people with particular guidance needs might be. The English label NEETs does not cover in this case. Over the last decade they have been labeled weak, marginalised, people with special guidance needs, people with extended guidance needs, in risk of educational drop out, or early school leavers. What all these labels have in common is the stigma (Plant, 2003).

This creates a dilemma: on the one hand is the societal aim of educational retention. This calls for guidance interventions. On the other hand , in focusing so strongly and almost exclusively on this particular target group, guidance may risk to stigmastise the very people they are aiming at helping, thus creating a NEET fence around them by insisting on their position as a minority. This is a classic example of blaming the victims, who in this case are young people with no job or no education. In short, prioritising guidance in this way may have a counter effect (Plant, 2010).

Social justice

Instead of labeling and putting people in little boxes, the real question should be: 'How can guidance develop social justice' (Irving & Malik, 2005). Individual deficits are often in focus when dealing with barriers to education, and the role of guidance in this respect. One current Danish example is the Educations Readiness Appraisal routine, by which youth guidance counsellors categorise youth in terms of such readiness in terms of personal, social, and competence aspects. Interestingly, the readiness of educational institutions to admit young applicants is not assessed. This is a blind spot, and it tends to leave institutional and societal aspects with less focus and attention. Such aspects may, however, be of equal importance, and together these factors may result in societal exclusion and marginalisation of people who leave education for whatever reason (Levitas, 1998). Watts (1999) has three explanations of social exclusion mechanisms, of which barriers to education is one aspect: the economic explanation, the moral one, and one which focuses on lack of cultural capital. The excluded, the drop outs, the early school leavers, the push outs, however, are heterogeneous, not a group. What, if anything, they have in common is their confusion, their frustration, their disillusionment, their low self-esteem and their alienation. Add those who

are disadvantaged by age, sex, class, ethnicity, religious background, employment status, illiteracy, rurality and refugee status.

Laudable as many guidance initiatives may be, they often have a particular focus, both in policy terms and on a practical level, in terms of the emphasis on individual deficits and difficulties. In most cases, the individual, rather than the educational institution, is seen as the problem. This is reflected in the labeling of people who do not take part in formal education or leave educational institutions. They are called Early School Leavers (ESL) in the EU Commission language, or NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in English speaking countries. One common label is educational Drop Outs. What these individuals have in common is that they do not fit easily into mainstream education. Or perhaps that mainstream education does not fit their needs. The point is the latter sentence, as they may in fact be push-outs, rather than drop outs. How is the problem viewed: that is the question: as an individual problem, or as an institutional/societal problem? 'What is the problem represented to be?' asks Bacchi (2009) in her discourse analysis. This is important, as the framing and conceptualising of the problem at hand also determines the strategies and interventions to solve the problem. In this case, the problem is represented as an individual lack of self esteem, stamina, personal clout, social capital, or personal drive and motivation. Conversely, this list of deficits may be viewed as symptoms of institutional difficulties or deficits, or of societal difficulties or deficits. This is an alternative representation of the problem, and it calls for alternative answers. One such example is depicted in the box below:

Collective Narrative Practice

Instead of isolating the few visibly vulnerable young people and meeting them with goal-oriented counseling methods, which apparently does not cause them to pursue their education, there are other options. Valgreen (2013) has further developed Collective Narrative Practice (Denborough, 2008) to adapt this approach for career guidance. Collective Narrative Practice has roots in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), and is concerned with supporting people to discover or rediscover communities. The idea is to strengthen positive relationships between people. The starting point is an individual story that is shared with others in a group and from the individual stories to create a collective document. Subsequently the document can be shared with other similar groups, making it a collective process. The life stories thus attain significance for all of the participants regardless of the individual's degree of vulnerability. Such approaches could be developed to de-individualise guidance practices (Thomsen, 2009).

Conclusion

Increasingly, career guidance is an area of policy interest in most European countries. But guidance is seen as a lever for other policy areas. This is, for example, reflected in the aims and working methods of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN), i.e. EU's think tank on career guidance. Thus guidance policies are more preoccupied with other policy areas than guidance, but in which career guidance may have a role to play: employment, education, social inclusion, gender equality, rurality, and economic development, for example. The strong policy focus mirrors policies of seeing guidance as a societal steering instrument, and thus as an instrument of social control, where it should be an instrument for emancipation and empowerment. This is the flip side of current guidance policies.

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