

Career education as a practice of social justice

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Welcome to the 55th issue of the NICEC journal. This issue contains a special collection on Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) in career development. This issue brings together new voices alongside established scholars, reflecting the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences that shape the field today. When this special collection was planned over a year ago, we were unaware that global events would mean that this issue could not be more relevant or timely. Less than two weeks before our call for papers was released, US President Trump had signed Executive Order 14151, titled 'Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing' (The White House, 2025), whose wide-reaching implications include the obliteration of government funding for a range of progressive programmes and the rolling back of hard-fought freedoms within the US. By virtue of global interdependence, we must pay attention.

We chose to adopt the expanded framing of 'justice', not only as a quirky semantic nod to the fictional guardians of peace and justice from a space opera franchise, but as a necessary reorientation. Justice foregrounds the structural and systemic dimensions of inequality that are not captured in the acronym 'EDI' alone and calls attention to the broader socio-political context in which careers unfold. It reminds us that to speak of careers without also confronting power is to risk reinforcing the very inequities we seek to challenge. Each word in the acronym signals a distinct but interrelated commitment in the context of career development. Equity recognises that equal treatment does not suffice when starting points and systemic barriers differ, requiring instead differentiated support that levels the field. Diversity celebrates the richness that comes from having a multiplicity of identities, backgrounds, and perspectives within society. Inclusion insists that institutions, policies and practices actively enable participation and belonging. Taken together, JEDI foregrounds a vision of career development as an inherently political practice concerned with human flourishing and collective wellbeing.

The roots of career development as we know it today are steeped in values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Sprouting from Frank Parsons' (1909) seminal work

Choosing a vocation, the sector sustains those nascent aims to improve the fates of those marginalised by society through the transmission of information, advice and guidance. Parsons' approach combined the scientific optimism of the Progressive Era with a moral imperative: that society *owed* its citizens meaningful work. In modern sociological terms, Parsons can be read as seeking to distribute cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) more equitably, by transmitting the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to navigate a stratified labour market.

A rich tradition of critical scholarship has since examined the extent to which those marginalised by society can ever really *choose* their livelihood. Debates have centred on the tension between individual agency and structural constraints, highlighting how the power and privilege bestowed by society combine to afford some people relatively more, or less, choice. The murmurs of the 'agency-structure' debate continue around the extent to which career guidance ameliorates the inequities of the social world or merely adapts individuals to unjust structures, despite many changes to the fundamentals of what can we call 'work', 'career', or 'vocation'.

The emergence, or increasing recognition, of the gig economy has transformed employment relationships and eroded associated protections. In response to this policy debates have begun to focus on what counts as 'fair', 'decent', or 'meaningful' work. At a global level, the International Labour Organisation (1999) articulated 'decent work' as a fundamental human right, linking it to poverty reduction, equity, and sustainable development. Building on this, Blustein (2019) extended the decent work agenda into career theory, arguing that precarious and unstable labour is not peripheral but central to people's career experience and must therefore shape how we theorise and practise guidance.

The career guidance for social justice movement extends this agenda by articulating how practitioners can actively resist and transform inequitable structures. Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's (2018) work offers a set of strategies for embedding social justice into guidance, moving beyond the diagnosis of inequality towards concrete practices of solidarity, critical reflection, and structural challenge. The scholarship of this movement foregrounds ideas of education as an emancipatory practice, drawn from the pioneering work of Freire (1970). His central concept of *conscientização* can be roughly explained as the educational process by which learners move beyond surface awareness of their situation towards a critical understanding of the historical, social and political forces that shape it, and crucially, link that understanding to collective action for change. An understanding of this can frame guidance practice as an educational intervention that not only helps individuals make sense of their circumstances, but also to recognise the wider structures influencing them, and act in solidarity to transform those structures (cf. the first two articles in this issue).

Set against these emancipatory aims is the pervasive backdrop of neoliberalism. Since the 1980s, neoliberal policy regimes have reshaped education and employment across the Global North and South, privileging market logics of competition, privatisation and responsabilisation. In this view, individuals are cast as entrepreneurs of the self, responsible for investing in their own employability, marketing their skills, and weathering structural insecurities through resilience. Career guidance is often co-opted into this agenda, tasked with producing 'work-ready' graduates, increasing human capital, and smoothing labour market transitions. The epistemic violence of neoliberalism lies in its denial of alternative possibilities. As Freire (2004) warned, it causes a fatalism that implies there is no

alternative, thereby obscuring the fact that existing social arrangements are historically contingent and politically constructed.

The need to address systemic issues in addition to those operating at individual and organisational levels puts into sharp focus the stormy conditions that individual career trajectories navigate. Career practitioners support individuals through changes to the geopolitical landscape; the current or legacy impacts of war, conflict and displacement; widening inequality, poverty and precarity. The responsibility placed on practitioners to swim against this tsunami of systemic issues and pursue the noble aims of emancipatory career guidance – ‘righting a wrong and bringing about a fairer society’ (Hooley & Sultana, 2016) – might seem overwhelming. And yet, as attested by the articles in this special collection, there is clear evidence that the career guidance community can find ways to *resist* through creative practices designed to uphold justice and equity.

From theory to practice

The first set of contributions in this special collection exemplify how critical theory can be mobilised in practice, showing how career development can help individuals navigate opportunities by equipping practitioners and communities to interrogate the conditions that shape those opportunities. Working explicitly in a Freirean register, **Coney** and **Fitzpatrick** provide an example of innovative careers education, translating emancipatory pedagogy into an impactful, inclusive careers intervention for autistic learners. Dialogue, co-construction and problem-posing replace deficit framings; students are treated as epistemic agents whose voices shape aims and methods. The result is guidance as praxis, cultivating critical consciousness while removing everyday barriers to participation. **Ribeiro** and **Figueiredo** then take us on an important return to the Latin American origins of *conscientização* and critical consciousness, connecting Freire’s educational philosophy, Martín-Baró’s liberation psychology, and Bohoslavsky’s career counselling. They argue that concepts forged through collective struggle in oppressive contexts must be critically contextualised when imported into Global North settings, lest they lose their transformative potential.

Sattler follows, proposing a ‘social cluster’ framework that surfaces how career stories are co-produced within wider discourses as a practical schema for holding agency and structure together in the guidance encounter. Through clustering individual narratives into shared patterns, Sattler contends that practitioners can name systemic forces, challenge exclusionary tropes and reopen foreclosed possibilities, suggesting a possible mechanism through which career guidance can create socially just spaces that resist neoliberal pressures. We next showcase the work of **Rowles**, this year’s winner of NICEC’s ‘Bill Law Memorial Award’ for her interdisciplinary, linguistics-informed interrogation of where ideas about ‘career’ originate, underscoring how conceptual vocabularies themselves carry normative assumptions baked into everyday career talk, and how reframing them can expand what counts as a viable future in so doing, offering guidance discourse as a lever for social inclusion.

Marginalisation and the lived experience

The second set of articles focuses on how marginalisation is lived and negotiated within guidance practice, foregrounding communities for whom career development can be

unevenly supported, neglected or structurally constrained. Each of these offers a window into how guidance can reproduce exclusion and act as a site of recognition and solidarity. We see gaps in provision, blocked transitions, invisible labours of integration, and the fragile moments where new possibilities emerge.

McKenzie explores the 'guidance process gap' in multicultural Ireland, showing how migrant students encounter fragmented career provision. The analysis points to systemic shortfalls rather than individual deficits, underscoring the need for coherent, equitable guidance infrastructures that can address cultural and linguistic diversity. **Comer** examines refugee-background youth in Scotland, mapping the barriers they face in progressing from further education to university. Despite strong personal aspirations, structural hurdles such as policy restrictions, financial obstacles, and limited institutional flexibility serve to narrow horizons for action. Observations of where guidance and support can make decisive differences are elucidated. **Kekki** takes us inside the everyday practices of Finnish career practitioners working with migrants. He depicts them as 'invisible street-level integrators,' simultaneously constrained by assimilationist policy logics and negotiating space for recognition of clients' complex stories. His analysis reveals both the hidden labour of practitioners and the ethical dilemmas of balancing systemic demands with human needs.

Boyd shifts the lens to first-generation university applicants in England. Using Careership theory, she demonstrates how horizons for action are bounded not only by structural inequalities but also by the ways guidance and open days are experienced. For these students, in-person events often serve as transformative turning points, provided they are created to centre a sense of belonging and resonance rather than merely delivering information.

Rooney examines the influence of gender-based violence on women's career trajectories through the lens of higher education practitioners. Her findings illuminate how abuse reverberates across domains of confidence, aspiration, and progression. Career guidance, in this context, is not simply about information-giving but about holding space for healing, resilience, and re-authoring futures. **Roberts** shifts the focus to midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus their careers after a break. Her analysis reveals the structural and cultural barriers that continue to narrow women's professional possibilities, even in high-status fields. The article speaks to the dual pressures of gendered expectations in both family and workplace contexts, and to the resilience required for re-entry and progression.

Millar brings to the surface the often-unspoken impact of child loss on career decision-making. This moving study illustrates how grief and bereavement, which are often overlooked in career development, profoundly shape identity and have significant implications for a person's career trajectory. The paper shows how career guidance can become inclusive and affirmative by addressing a form of loss that is frequently silenced. This collection concludes with **Levett**, who uses Photovoice methodology to create spaces for resonance and reflection in career support. They centre participants' visual narratives, she demonstrates how career guidance can make visible the interior worlds of clients and generate new modes of understanding that transcend traditional models. Resonance here becomes both a research tool and a principle of socially just practice. These contributions foreground a community-focused ethical horizon of career development to include care, recognition, and resonance as central to just practice. Together, they show that when

practitioners attend to the profound embodiment of emotions that texture a person's career resulting from experiences of marginalisation, displacement, violence and loss, guidance can offer value for transformation at the individual level.

Global challenges and the future

Following the special collection, this issue also includes three general articles on career guidance, with a common theme of global challenges and future horizons. **Chen et al.** investigate the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on student career development, showing how crises exacerbate inequities while prompting adaptive forms of digital guidance. *Grant* addresses climate change, exploring how strategic leaders view the role of guidance in the face of ecological crisis. Her findings expose tensions in 'green guidance,' particularly concerns about neutrality, but also the emerging recognition that justice must extend to planetary futures. In the final article of this issue, and possibly the final article of his groundbreaking career, **Andrews** takes a historical lens to school-based guidance in England, drawing lessons from the past to envisage possible futures. His analysis highlights cycles of reform and retrenchment, reminding us that justice in career education requires both historical memory and forward vision.

The issue closes with three book reviews: *Decent work, inclusion and sustainability*, *Developing employability capital in university students* and *Navigating career options for a resilient and sustainable future*.

Conclusion

We hope this issue sparks further consideration and discussion about a future vision for the profession that is purpose-driven and which seeks the collective pursuit of dignity, decent work, sustainability, and justice. The collection featured shows that career development work is not neutral; guidance practice, theoretical contributions and policy interventions serve to challenge or uphold inequity. The authors urge us towards critical reflexivity, reminding us to question language, structures, and power. Through these contributions, we see how practitioners are empowered to act as agents of change, helping individuals recognise how they may internalise or embody dominant narratives as personal failings, to resist that responsabilisation and instead open spaces for solidarity and transformation.

Career development is a field caught in tension. We battle co-option into neoliberal logics of human capital and employability as a necessary condition for being able to have the privilege to serve others. Yet, we are still animated by our emancipatory roots, and this offers hope for the future that resists fatalism (without being too Panglossian). This hope is expressed through the contention argued here that career education is a practice of social justice. Every act of guidance involves questions of access, recognition, and dignity that signal whose knowledge counts and whose futures are imagined as possible. We can choose to expose that where neoliberalism frames freedom as competition, merit, and choice, it serves as a trap that narrows horizons while insisting upon their expansion, and instead delivers insecurity, precarity, and disconnection. In the act of naming the system as contingent and constructed, we create space to imagine alternatives. Career practice itself operates as a site where structural inequities are materialised and, therefore, where they can be disrupted, through affirming dignity, attending to trauma and grief, creating dialogical and participatory spaces, and situating careers within ecological and political contexts.

Of course, this issue could not capture every work emerging in response to our call. We are mindful of colleagues whose contributions lie beyond these pages and of important perspectives that await exposition. The strength of such a response suggests that there is scope to revisit this theme in future issues, ensuring that justice, equity, diversity and inclusion remain at the centre of our collective inquiry. While our work continues, this issue functions as a formidable reminder that career education and counselling offer a powerful site of resistance, recognition, and re-imagining. In this way, career education affirms that another future is possible, and that working towards it is both our professional mission and our ethical obligation.



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