“It’s about life and death” – Asylum seeking students and ”high-stakes counselling” in Sweden

Type of contribution: Paper

Authors of proposal
Jonna Linde, Umeå University, Jonna.linde@umu.se
Joakim Lindgren, Umeå University, Joakim.lindgren@umu.se
Åsa Sundelin, Stockholm University, Asa.sundelin@edu.su.se

Abstract
In Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, education and work are seen as important in the realisation of social goals as equal opportunities, community fellowship and social inclusion. Thus, school teachers and career counsellors are considered as important facilitators towards career development. During 2015 /2016, Sweden experienced the largest proportionate influx of refugees in Europe with profound effects on career guidance and counselling in upper secondary school. This paper highlights and analyse a changed professional context for career counsellors working with asylum seeking students – what we term “high-stakes counselling” where the career counselling process is intertwined with migration regulations. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) theory the analysis points to the complexity and hard emotional pressure on the career counsellors as their work may implicate a matter of “life and death” for the young refugees. Career counsellors have to adapt to regulations that narrows their work for expansion of horizon for action and social inclusion substantially.

Keywords: refugees, career counselling, social justice

Relation to the conference theme
The paper critically analyses the scope for career guidance and support to young refugees being in a situation characterized by high risk and uncertainty as well as limited horizons for action.

General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework
In the wake of the global refugee crisis in 2015-2016 Sweden received more immigrants per capita than any other European country (Karlsdóttir 2018). Consequently, immigrant students constitute a large part of the students at the Introductory Programmes (IPs). The IPs are intended for pupils who are not qualified for the national programmes in Swedish upper secondary school and one of the five IPs is Language Introduction Program (LIP) which is intended for students who have recently moved to
Sweden. Many of the students in LIP are in an ongoing asylum process. On 1 July 2018, a temporary amendment to the law on upper secondary school came into force and gives unaccompanied children who have received a decision on deportation an opportunity to get a residence permit to study. Unaccompanied children who arrived in Sweden before November 24, 2015, but who received the asylum application registered with the Migration Board only after that date, may be covered by the new upper secondary law. If the asylum seeking students complete their education successfully they can apply to get 6 months extension to get a job in Sweden. If the students can support themselves through income from work or their own company, they have the possibility of a permanent residence permit. In January 2019 the Swedish migration agency had received a total number of 11 745 applications, of which 5096 were granted and 2405 were rejected, 3938 were still waiting for a decision (Migrationsverket 2019).

For young asylum-seeking students the pressure to complete upper secondary education is dramatic and stakes are very high. In addition, many asylum-seeking students are unaccompanied minors, i.e. a person “who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so” (UNHCR, 1997 p. 7). Most of them have dramatic experiences from war, terror and poverty (Menjívar and Perreira 2019). In addition, we know that this particular group of young people are living in Sweden under poor social, economic and housing conditions where they are left waiting for decisions in an unclear legal situation. Their lives are thus characterized by anxiety, uncertainty and poor mental health (Kunskapscentrum för ensamkommande barn 2018). The asylum seeking students’ path is clearly pointed out by structural limitations that clashes with the policy ideals regarding career development in Sweden. Overall, the legal context is highly complex and municipalities have interpreted the amendment differently. From a career counselling perspective, the counselling process becomes intertwined with migration legislations. For career counselors, this situation is challenging both professionally and ethically.

Against this background the aim is to describe a changed juridical, educational and interpersonal situation that we term “high stake counselling”. More specifically, we describe how career counsellors navigate between ideals of fulfilling the dreams of the individual and matching what is actually possible when working with vulnerable students without permanent residence permit under conditions were many old strategies, routines, rules and methods may not apply. We provide an illustration of the complexity of career counsellors’ everyday enactment of policy, legislation and welfare structure. Thus we provide knowledge about how career counsellors’ work is framed by regulations and affect not only young peoples’ career chances but their chances to get a residence permit.

The theoretical framework of Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) is applied in the analysis, by using the notions of field, position and horizon for action to clarify how career counsellors navigate between different ideals. Similarities in the patterns from the perspectives of the five municipalities were identified and form the basis for the preliminary results.

**Methods/methodology**

We are inspired by ethnography and we thus focus on cultural formations and maintenance. The data is based on the direct involvement and long-term engagement with processual matters in counselling activities. This paper has a selective intermittent time mode approach which means that the frequency of the visits have been flexible and the selection is made by relevance (Jeffrey and Troman 2004). The intention is to capture career counsellors’ motions and navigation on the field of their everyday work regarding ideals of policy, career development and the actual possibilities for the individual without permanent resident permit.

The foundation of data derives from observations and field conversations in five different municipalities in Sweden that offers LIPs, during the autumn semester 2018. The schedule for observations was selective in relations to occasions when there were career developmental activities planned for the students. The number of observations in each municipality varies depending on the frequency of career developmental activities. The total time for observations is approximately 24 days. Examples of career developmental activities included in observations are career counsellors’...
information about adult education, information from trade union representatives, motivational and inspirational lessons, regular teaching and individual counselling. We also draw on a small number of observations of meetings with other school staff and informal conversations and interviews with career counsellors.

We transcribed field notes and interviews and analysed the data through the theoretical lenses provided by Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997). We then applied the notions of field, position and horizon for action on data from the five different municipalities. Common patterns arose from the analysis of the five contexts, which constitute the basis of the results.

Outcomes/ expected results
Preliminary results draw attention to the hard emotional pressure on career counsellors as the outcome of their work is decisive for whether the students have the opportunity to apply for a temporary permit to stay (or if they are expelled and must return to warzones, poverty and uncertainty). Career counsellors have to navigate in a changed juridical and educational context where new regulations and concerns become a part of professional practice. They must hence adapt to the complicated regulative structures regarding permanent residence permit at the expense of policy ideals on career guidance. At the same time, organisational structures and routines in schools are under constant change in order to deal with influx of new groups of students. As a consequence they are tied up by regulations and structures of what is actually possible for asylum seeking students. Career counsellors thus seems to be stuck between a rock and a hard place – between on the one side democratic policy ideals and ethical convictions and on the other side the harsh reality. Overall, the data suggests that meetings between asylum seeking students and counsellors may implicate matters of life and death. This constitute one aspect of a professional practice that we term high-stake counselling.

References


