

Employer engagement in education: using phenomenography to find out how the facilitator understands their role

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Enterprise Coordinators play a key role in supporting the careers leader in schools and colleges and facilitating their relationships with volunteers from the world of work. This article explores how Enterprise Coordinators understand their work. Taking a phenomenographical approach, four categories of understanding have been developed ('critical friend', 'matchmaker', collaborator', and 'reflective practitioner') that can be used to guide the training and development of all practitioners tasked with facilitating the relationship between schools and employers. It is hoped that this article can also add to the literature of how to undertake a phenomenographical study.



Introduction

The position of Enterprise Coordinator (EC) was created when the government-funded Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) was set up in England in 2015 as a partnership body to provide support for school and college careers programmes (Andrews & Hooley, 2019). The CEC co-funds the role of the EC, working in partnership with the local authority or other stakeholders.

An EC is a professional, 'who work with schools, colleges, employers and careers organisations to build a local network and ensure that an area has high-quality careers provision. A key responsibility is recruiting Enterprise Advisers (EA) and connecting them to education' (Andrews & Hooley, 2018, p. xii). An EA is 'an employer volunteer who works with a school or college in England to support their careers

programme. Enterprise Advisers are usually more senior volunteers who focus on strategic issues' (p. xii). The main contact within schools and colleges for both the EC and the EA is the Careers Leader: 'the individual responsible and accountable for leading a school's or college's careers programme' (p. xi). Based on recent research, this article explores how Enterprise Coordinators understand their work.

Literature review

Several research papers have been published during the last five years which evaluate the effectiveness of the changing landscape in careers education in England's schools and colleges. Focussing on key findings that relate to the role of the facilitator in developing a network and positive relationships between schools/colleges and employers, the literature review found similar enablers and barriers were repeatedly identified. However, while the research had considered the role of the EA, little was known about the work of the EC - who plays a key facilitator role in developing and maintaining relationships between education and stakeholders.

Of note, Hanson et al. (2019), in their evaluation of the Gatsby benchmarks in the North East of England, found the work of a regional facilitator enabled external stakeholders to work efficiently with education providers, the formation of a formal regional network to support the careers leaders, and access to regional schemes and projects. Similarly, a report by Pye Tait Consulting (2017) that reviewed the early Enterprise Adviser Network (EAN) on behalf of the CEC, indicated the importance of the EC role:

There is a strong consensus that the role of the EC [Enterprise Coordinator] is pivotal to the effective functioning of the EAN. Enterprise Coordinators play a proactive role in building networks and joining the dots.

(Pye Tait Consulting, 2017, p. 10).

Andrews and Hooley's (2019) study of 27 careers leaders in English secondary schools concluded that schools should be encouraged to share good practice by building communities of practice. Likewise, the CEC acknowledges that the organisation and others can develop strategies to bolster the careers leader's role and achieve success (CEC, 2019). Regrettably, the CEC report does not suggest *how*. However, an earlier paper of influence which investigated what empowers a careers guidance programme and how that power is transmitted through the organisation (Watts, 1996) validates the role of an external facilitator in helping the school to access external agencies and, critically, aiding with staff training thus ensuring 'buy-in' from teachers.

Interestingly, Andrews and Hooley (2019) did find challenges to the network in relation to impact on schools' and colleges' careers provision. All have the interaction of the EA and school at their core and include: a lack of engagement from the school's Senior Leadership Team; misaligned expectations between education and employer; that the EA did not expect to be the 'driving force' behind the relationship with schools; and other barriers, such as time, funding, and change of education staff. These challenges are consistent with earlier research and therefore unsurprising. However, whilst recommendations to the CEC were made, none related to the professional development of the EC, despite the identification of the pivotal nature of their role.

Of interest, while there is little direct evidence, the literature review strongly indicates that the EC has an important role to play in the successful implementation of a school's careers programme. They do this by working with the Careers Leader to support the school/college in delivering the Gatsby benchmarks, helping the institution to work with employers, and engage with wider networks. Hence, the review also implies the importance of ongoing continuing professional development in order to be successful in this role.

Taking a phenomenographical approach

Earlier research identified barriers to the successful relationship between education and the world of work, for example, misaligned expectations between teachers and employers. Undertaken in the summer of 2020, the purpose of this study was to explore how ECs understand their role by revealing different ways of successfully doing the job, and to identify and disseminate examples of best practice.

To investigate ways of understanding the work of an EC a phenomenographical approach was adopted. Whilst related to phenomenology, phenomenography is a qualitative research methodology, within the interpretivist paradigm, that investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something (Marton, 1986). Phenomenography exposes the categories of understanding the phenomenon (the EC's work) not just what it is to be an EC.

Table 1. Research Design

Terminology	Example
Phenomenon	Being an EC
Phenomenology	Focuses on the essence of being an EC (the ' <i>what</i> ')
Phenomenography	Focuses on experiences and perceptions of being an EC (the ' <i>how</i> ')

Requests for participants were posted on Facebook, LinkedIn, and sent via CEC internal communications. From this, eight ECs from across the north and the midlands of England agreed to be interviewed. All were given detailed information about the study and asked to give informed consent by signing a participation questionnaire. Another ethical consideration was to maintain the anonymity of the participants. This was done by randomly assigning a number to each participant and ensuring that no identifying information was included in the published data or quotes used.

Many studies using a phenomenographic research design use three questions derived from Dell’Alba’s (1998) study of medical students:

1. When do you feel you have been successful in your work?
2. What is difficult, or what hinders you, in your work?
3. What is the core of your professional work?

Larsson and Holmstrom (2007) used these questions in their informative work that compared phenomenographic and phenomenological analysis for the benefit of social science researchers. The three questions were used during the semi-structured interviews with eight ECs, and further questions were asked in response to the interviewees’ answers. This allowed deeper probing of the participants understanding of their work. For example: ‘Can you give me an example of...?’; and ‘Can you explain how...?’

Larsson’s and Holmstrom’s (2007) guidance was used to structure the phenomenographical analysis of the interviews. The first stage was to read the transcript and mark where the participant gave answers to the three main questions. In each part of a marked passage two explicit things were looked for, what is the focus of the EC’s attention and how do they describe their way of working?

The following excerpt from one interview, talking about what hinders their work, serves as an example:

I look after 27 schools now, which is a real lot. In terms of my commitments for school, what I always say is an hour meeting each month, me and the careers leader and termly Compass completions with the EA, myself, link governor.

(Participant 4)

The ‘*what*’ is looking after 27 schools. The ‘*how*’ is having a meeting each month with the Careers Leader and having a meeting each term with the Careers Leader, EA, and link governor to complete the CEC Compass report.

The transcripts were repeatedly read to look for non-dominant ways of understanding the work - again

scrutinising what was the focus and how the EC described their way of working. Similar descriptions from all the interviews were then grouped into categories and a new descriptor created for each category and a metaphor that sums up the way of working was assigned.

Table 2. Categories

Categories	Metaphor for category
Working with staff in schools to ensure their careers programme progresses.	Critical friend
Working with EAs: recruiting them and matching them to schools.	Matchmaker
Collaborating across the region to reduce workload and share good practice.	Collaborator
Reflects on own practice. Training and developing people.	Reflective practitioner

Key findings

From the analysis, four categories of understanding the EC’s professional work were identified. In modelling phenomenographic research, Larsson and Holmstrom (2007) explain that the categories of description are the researcher’s way of expressing the variations in the conceptions. The metaphors illustrate the ways of relating to the work, they are not meant to be a descriptive name or typology.

1. Critical friend – Working with staff in schools to ensure their careers programme progresses

The ‘critical friend’ EC forms a good relationship with the Careers Leader, encouraging them to be critical in their evaluation of the careers provision. As a ‘critical friend’ the EC understands what the school’s needs

and priorities are and where career learning fits in with this. They strive for good working relationships with the headteacher and careers link governor. The 'critical friend' sense checks the information from external agencies that schools can be bombarded with:

I know that it [Careers Leader] can feel a very lonely position and actually I'm here for you as well if you want to bounce anything off me.

(Participant 1)

2. Matchmaker – Working with EAs: recruiting them and matching them to schools

The 'matchmaker' EC devises strategies for recruiting new EAs, either using their own network, or the network of the wider organisation they are employed in. The 'matchmaker' uses a well-planned induction process to ensure that the EA properly understands their role. The EC carefully matches the EA (considering their skills and industry sector) with the needs and priorities of the school/college. They ensure the school is fully prepared to work with the EA and understand what the EA can offer. 'Matchmakers' invest time to build the relationship between the careers leader and EA. The EC knows when it is not appropriate to match an EA with a school and are prepared to wait until the school is ready:

It's knowing what the school needs, what they're trying to achieve and it's knowing the EA.

(Participant 2)

3. Collaborator – Collaborating across the region to reduce workload and share good practice

The 'collaborator' EC sees the 'bigger picture' across the region. 'Collaborators' plan regional career events for multiple schools to attend, thus reducing teacher workload and the demands on employers. The EC keeps up to date with their wider organisation's skills and labour force priorities, using this to inform their EA recruitment. The 'collaborator' is aware that their work overlaps with neighbouring regions and they liaise with EC colleagues in bordering regions:

I'd rather do things centrally than do things, you know, in each school, cause if not we just have 14 or 15 different little events going on, with a big call on employers as well and training providers.

(Participant 3)

4. Reflective practitioner – Reflects on own practice; training and developing people

The 'reflective practitioner' EC is able to evaluate their own performance. They contribute to training materials for colleagues, schools and EAs. 'Reflective practitioners' are able to identify the weaker areas of practice within the local systems that require further development:

We found we were inducting EAs to a really high standard, but then when they were getting to the school, they weren't having the experience that they wanted because the school maybe weren't fully aware, or weren't prepared enough for what the EA was actually there to do. So we actually now show them [careers leader] the same resource we induct our EAs with, so that our careers leaders understand exactly what our EAs have been inducted to do.

(Participant 8)

To summarise, adopting a phenomenographical approach revealed four different categories of understanding of how to be an EC: 'critical friend', 'matchmaker', 'collaborator' and 'reflective practitioner'. While earlier research had repeatedly highlighted barriers, such as misaligned expectations between school and employer, this research provided unique insights into *how* to do the work to overcome these barriers.

Discussion

From critically reflecting on the analysis, it became apparent that all the categories of understanding have the progress of the school/college (and ultimately the development of the young people) in focus but take differing perspectives. The two most common categories were 'critical friend' and 'matchmaker'.

All the participants had at least one of these as their dominant way of understanding the work and so these are referred to as primary categories. The other two modes of understanding, namely ‘collaborator’ and ‘reflective practitioner’, were relatively uncommon, and so are referred to as secondary categories. None of the ECs showed all four categories of understanding.

Further analysis of the categories was completed revealing a hierarchical structure and logical relationship between the different ways of understanding the work of the EC:

Figure 1. The ECs work map, representing the collective understanding of the work of a group of ECs

<p>Collaborator</p> <p>Collaborating across the region to reduce workload and share good practice.</p>	<p>Reflective practitioner</p> <p>Reflects on own practice. Training and developing people.</p>
<p>Critical friend</p> <p>Working with staff in schools to ensure their careers programme progresses.</p>	<p>Matchmaker</p> <p>Working with EAs, recruiting them and matching them to schools.</p>

A hierarchy in the ways of understanding was supported by the evidence, with three of the eight participants revealing ‘collaborator’ and two participants describing ‘reflective practitioner’ as their way of understanding the work. Furthermore, in order for an EC to focus on developing the behaviours of a ‘collaborator’ or ‘reflective practitioner’, the evidence revealed that they must also be able to operate in the categories ‘critical friend’ and/or ‘matchmaker’. This is because an understanding as ‘collaborator’ or ‘reflective practitioner’ developed for all the ECs from their understanding as ‘critical friend’ and/or ‘matchmaker’. Notably the reverse did not occur.

Discussion of secondary findings

More detailed analysis of the interview transcripts identified four main barriers experienced by ECs.

1) The apparent conflicting priorities of schools

This barrier was identified by five of the participants. Reasons for the difficulty in managing the schools were at an organisational level (e.g. careers education was not a priority for the school) or at a personal level (e.g. the careers leader was unable to form a working relationship with the EA):

It is the most frustrating thing in the job to be honest, like, we have Careers Leaders that literally have two hours a fortnight to do their Careers Leader role, they have no interest in careers.

(Participant 8)

2) Complexity of the organisational structure that the EC ‘sits in’

The participants within this study worked out of a range of organisations (Local Enterprise Partnership, Chamber of Commerce, Education Trust, Local Authority, Careers Hub). They explained how the organisational structure was a barrier to their work, illustrating this with reasons such as, working in a fractured team, confusion of their place within the management structure, and what ‘powers’ they had within the organisation.

3) Expectations of funding organisations

Three of the interviewees described how funding organisations can be disconnected from what is happening with the day-to-day work of ECs and what is happening in schools. One participant talked about funding organisations priority targets changing termly and that this was too soon for changes within schools to have made an impact.

I don’t think that some of them [funding organisations] fully appreciate that schools have got different drivers and different priorities, and yet careers is a definite priority in all schools, but they’re not measured by it. And therefore, they’re automatically going to have a leaning towards those things that they are measured by, it’s human nature, it’s organisational nature.

(Participant 3)

4) EA recruitment

Whilst all participants referred to the recruitment of EAs as part of their work, interviewees specifically highlighted this as a barrier. The reasons included: recruitment took time away from working with the schools that actually required the support, the rural location meant that lack of potential EAs and transport links affected recruitment, or that there was no real recruitment strategy within their wider organisation.

Many of the barriers identified in earlier work that are concerned with schools remain. Hutchinson et al. (2019) found that those ECs located in a Careers Hub had greater strategic direction. However, one of the participants in this study who said that the complexity of the organisational structure was a hindrance, works within a Careers Hub. In contrast, a lack of suitable EAs and the difficulty in recruiting them could be connected to the barriers identified in earlier work. For example, if ECs are struggling to form a pool of EAs from which they can choose to assign one to a school, the drivers of achieving targets may cause some ECs to place EAs in a school that they are not well matched to, leading to misaligned expectations.

Implications for practice

The job description and resources for an EC (CEC, 2020) inform *'what'* their role is and *'what'* they are to do, but it gives little guidance about *'how'* to do this. If ECs are to help improve the engagement of the school's Senior Leadership Team, manage the expectations between education and employer, and help the school to understand why time and funding for careers education is important, then the EC must have the behaviours in order to do this.

To support them in this aspect of development, collating examples of good practice for all four categories of understanding provides a narrative that can be used by the EC, or any other facilitator, to strengthen their weaker areas of work. Also, the hierarchy 'map' (figure 1) could be used for the recruitment, training and continued development of ECs and other practitioners whose role involves

developing relationships between education and employers. This is because it indicates that ECs should be encouraged to consolidate their practice as 'critical friend' and 'matchmaker' before developing the behaviours of a 'collaborator' or 'reflective practitioner'.

Conclusion

The facilitator plays a crucial role in the successful development of strategic relationships between learning organisations and their stakeholders. The evidence from this study shows four ways of understanding the work of the EC that can be used as guidance for all organisations who have practitioners involved with developing and maintaining relationships between those in education and the world of work. In summary, such organisations could consider using the categories from the 'map of the ways of work' as a tool when recruiting and thus aim to have a team with strengths in all four categories. By providing training opportunities for staff to audit their skills ECs can understand their strengths and areas for development, share best practice and develop their 'weaker' ways of understanding the work.

Thoughts on the methodology

This research was undertaken as part of my Master's degree in Careers Education and Coaching. As a former teacher, I was keen to add to the existing knowledge base for improving careers education and employer engagement in schools. Taking a phenomenographical approach uncovered narratives that have been collated to offer guidance for those facilitating employer engagement with education. While other research methods may have uncovered *'what'* the facilitator does and the barriers they face, importantly, phenomenography gives examples of *'how'* they work to overcome the barriers.



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