

Career practitioners as invisible street-level integrators

Short Article

10.20856/jnicec.5508

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Kekki, M. (2025). Career practitioners as invisible street-level integrators. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 55(1), 118-124. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5508>

Abstract

What is the most important task of career practitioners when working with migrants? Furthermore, who can define this task? Can career practitioners aim at changing people's stories and lives? In my doctoral thesis, I studied Finnish career practitioners from three viewpoints and analysed how they use power, how they see their professional agency and how they use discretion in their work. In this short text, I discuss what all this means for the profession and how we could support career practitioners to assume a more visible role in migrant integration.

Key words: migrants, integration, career guidance, street-level work, Finland

Introduction

In 2007, I attended the International Association for Educational and Vocational (IAEVG) conference in Italy. One of the keynote lectures was given by Professor Salvatore Soresi from the University of Padova. During his lecture, he said that '*the most important task of career practitioners is to change the endings of stories that have already been told*' (Soresi, 2007). For a long time, this sentence intrigued me, first working as a government bureaucrat dealing with career guidance issues, then later, working as a career practitioner myself. I suppose I took it as a personal guideline, or as one of them in my own work. I appreciated the challenge included in Soresi's idea, and the perspective it opened: career counselling can make a difference in people's lives. As time has passed by, I notice I have a more critical view of Salvatore Soresi's idea than I used to. But I do still think that there are several interesting points included in his sentence. In this article, I will discuss this in relation to my doctoral thesis.

In my thesis, I studied Finnish career practitioners working within the national integration programme for adult jobseekers with a migration background (Kekki, 2024). This is a programme that local programme providers run, which means both private companies and public training institutions, such as, for instance, schools or colleges of vocational education and training. The programme providers were selected through regional tender processes, and according to guidelines established by the employment administration, which at the highest policy level means the Ministry of Employment and the Economy. In other words, the integration training programme is one of the employment measures of the Finnish employment policy. The main contents of the training programme are language studies and so-called civic skills, which means getting acquainted with the Finnish education and employment system, labour markets, pensions, taxation, etc. Yearly, roughly half of the migrants moving to Finland participate in this programme, so it has a central role in the Finnish integration practices.

The two main employee groups working in the programme are language teachers and career practitioners. Career guidance included in the programme consists of individual career counselling and lessons in civic skills: the educational and employment systems, labour market, etc. There are no formal national requirements for career practitioners regarding qualifications. Therefore, the practitioners' experience and background vary. The practitioners I interviewed all had higher education degrees in some field, but none of them had a career guidance degree or diploma.

My thesis was based on qualitative analysis of two interrelated datasets collected in 2019-2020. The first dataset consisted of 18 video-recorded counselling discussions between career practitioners and their migrant clients. The second dataset, with 18 semi-structured interviews, was collected by using the stimulated recall method (Bloom, 1953): showing each practitioner their own discussions from the first dataset and then interviewing them on what they saw happening during those discussions. Both datasets were analysed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019).

The most important task of career practitioners

Let us go back to the beginning of Soresi's sentence, referring to '*the most important task of a career practitioner*', and stop for a moment to think who gets to define what is the most important task of these professionals?

For the career practitioners working in the integration training programme, it is the employment administration together with the Finnish integration policy, and the employment and integration legislation together. In this context, the most important task is not changing the endings of any stories, told or untold, but first and foremost to ensure the fast employment of migrants. The official Finnish integration policy – in a similar way to many other European countries – emphasises employment as the utmost goal of integration of people with a migration background (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.). This reflects a development where the emphasis is on assimilation as the dominant form of integration (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Phillimore, 2018; Waal, 2021).

The career practitioners I studied in my thesis were in a difficult situation: despite their own possible ideas or approaches, whatever they chose to do needed to align with this overarching goal set by the employment and integration policies. In other terms, they

represent one type of a street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 2010), a public services worker who needs to balance between policy ideals and client work and deal with a gap and a tension between these two. Another important feature of the street-level bureaucrat position is that the career counselling practices within the programme were not regulated or managed in any explicit way (Lipsky, 2010), leaving the practitioners to navigate their way through the daily tasks. Watts (1996) has described this situation when discussing career practitioners assuming different roles in their work, such as a facilitator, a gatekeeper or an advocate. Depending on whether the practitioner chooses to emphasise the client's or the society's viewpoints and whether to maintain the existing status quo or strive for change, they end up in different roles and positions in relation to their clients.

Career practitioners using power

According to Soresi, the career practitioners should '*change the endings of stories already told*'. If we take this task as granted and assume that the practitioners need to change something that exists, should that be considered as an act of power? Changing something personal or individual or influencing it requires indeed power. In my thesis, I was interested in what kind of power can be recognised in the current career practices, which often are considered as neutral, client-centred, humanistic, meaning well, and considering a person's whole life in all its complexity. I was curious to explore whether there were other aspects of career guidance that could be observed in the daily career practices of career practitioners and their counselees by studying video-recorded career discussions (Kekki, 2022). What often happened in these discussions was that the practitioners took over, particularly when their clients wished to bring up a discussion topic. Practitioners often brushed these openings aside, ignored them, or downplayed their significance. In other words, they used a very definite and precise power when deciding which topics belonged to the career discussions and which did not.

Career practitioners negotiating their professional agency.

In another study, I also interviewed career practitioners and examined how they experience their professional space, or professional agency (Kekki & Linde, 2024). Here, I cooperated with a Swedish researcher, who approached me with the same question about the data that was collected in Sweden. Both the Finnish and Swedish career practitioners saw their professional agency as crossing several so-called normal boundaries: they felt they needed to consider larger and more complex issues when working with people with a migration background. They also thought that they needed to go further back in time regarding people's life experiences to better understand their situations. Furthermore, they also thought that their professional tasks overlapped with those of other professionals, for instance, in issues like mental health. The career practitioners were working in a position where they needed at the same time try to enable things to happen, for instance a job application to be successful, or some of their counselees to get a study place, but also to constrain things: to stop so-called unrealistic career plans to find work in fields where there weren't necessarily a lot of vacant positions, or to tell people that they couldn't get for instance a lawyer's degree in only a couple of years' time as they thought – and then explain how many years getting a law degree would in fact take and what it would require.

Career practitioners using discretion and stereotyping

A third topic I examined was what kind of discretion the career practitioners are implementing (Kekki & Souto, 2025). In this exercise, I examined my data together with data concerning career practitioners working in basic and secondary education in Finland. We interpreted discretion as meaning what kind of decisions the practitioners would make regarding their counselees and deciding where to direct their focus in their work, how to cope with complex situations and how to solve unexpected new situations and problems (see also Zacka, 2017). What we found out is that there are several situations where the practitioners needed to use their discretion. Primarily, there are the tricky or difficult ones where they need to relate to some ethical pondering, value-related decision-making, or professional codes. In these situations, the practitioners needed to find suitable coping strategies, both to get forward with their work and to make the situation professionally manageable for themselves. One of the obvious coping strategies used by the practitioners was stereotyping, to consider the migrants as one homogeneous group and thus to ignore the individual specialities involved.

Career practitioners aiming to change things

So, based on these findings, I now look at Salvatore Soresi's statement with a fresh perspective: is it acceptable to assume that career practitioners should aim at changing things, and if yes, changing on whose terms and how? Potentially, the practitioners I have studied could be seen as trying to change things for their counselees but also trying to understand them and see how they could be supported to go wherever they wish to go. Often it is not the practitioners' choice how to go about their work, and they may in fact end up in complex situations where they need to figure out the best solution or the way forward, despite their own intentions, ambitions or aspirations. The last part of Soresi's sentence speaks about '*the endings of stories that have been told*'. Listening to people's stories in career guidance is vital. Especially people with a migration background, too often feel that no one is interested in their stories. It may well be that a career practitioner is the first one to be interested in hearing them. Nevertheless, listening to people and hearing them out would be vital also for their integration and for them to experience something we can call social justice.

Career guidance as a space for recognition

Nancy Fraser (2005) has stated how social justice is built on three dimensions: distribution, recognition and representation. Here, distribution refers to how socio-economic resources should be allocated so that they enhance, rather than jeopardise, social justice and representation, for instance, ensuring that people with a migration background can participate in the political structures and institutions of their new environment. With the third dimension, recognition, Fraser refers particularly to how people should be allowed to participate in social interaction fully. With recognition in mind, we can also consider whether and how people with a migration background can feel accepted as part of their new environment, and whether they feel they belong there. Here, listening to their stories might be the first step, even if the stories may be strange or complex or difficult to understand or sometimes even scary. We should make sure that the career practitioners, who hold a unique position regarding integration, have the resources, and especially time,

to listen to the stories and find ways to weave this listening into their career counselling practices.

The changing Finnish integration landscape

The Finnish integration policy is currently facing significant changes. A new legislation on integration took effect from the beginning of 2025 (Ministry of the Interior, n.d.). One major reform was that the municipalities will assume a bigger role in the integration practices, including a responsibility in arranging integration programmes. Another reform is that a new system of information courses on Finnish society was introduced. In this new system, people should be able to receive the information in their own first language, or in any other language they know well, instead of Finnish and Swedish as it has been so far. What remains the same is the idea that the integration programme for adult jobseekers remains at the responsibility of the public employment services, but now at the municipal level.

One thing that is not changing, at least not immediately, is the role and work of career practitioners. That remains invisible within the new legislation and the new responsibility structure, even though career counselling is mentioned for the first time in the new law as one of the contents of the integration training programme. For the career practitioners, the status quo thus remains: neither the current nor the new legislation nor the integration programme curriculum specifically mentions these professionals, although their role within the integration structure is unique. When these practitioners work with a marginalised group of people, namely unemployed and job-seeking people with a migration background, it marginalises the practitioners themselves. Neither are these professionals always included in the bigger picture of Finnish career guidance services.

When going back again to Salvatore Soresi's statement and looking at the very last word in it: 'told', it seems quite innocent. However, when one starts thinking about it more closely, there are at least two questions that come to mind: told by whom, and told to whom? People with a migration background are very often seen as objects, as empty vessels that can be defined by the system and the society they are entering. This system and this society quickly tell them who they are, and especially who they should become: an obedient, flexible and humble labour force that needs to adapt to their new environment. They also expected to be assimilated into it, in terms of this new environment. In this telling, the background and earlier experiences of these people are not valued in our eyes. However, through the means and practices of career guidance, and the expertise and knowledge of career practitioners, their side of the situation could be heard better. Their skills and cultural and cognitive capital could be recognised much better than now, again strengthening their integration process and ensuring that they have a real chance to contribute to our system, our society.

Conclusion

Most of us agree that, especially during the past decade, integration and migration have become more and more politicised overall in Europe. Like many other elements of our societies, integration is also assessed by short-term outcomes, gains and losses. Integration is deemed a failure if a person moving to a new country doesn't quickly become

employed and stay employed. There is little room for understanding and recognising how long a successful integration process may take, and how important things like belonging, feeling as part of a new society, participation, and being met as a proper human being are. What we would therefore need is a renewed way of discussing integration: both what we mean by it and what we want from it. We also need to raise the visibility of career guidance and particularly career practitioners, and start talking about what kind of role they could have in the integration and integrative practices. For long enough, they have been the invisible street-level workers who nevertheless carry a lot of weight on their shoulders, and who can make a difference in what integration looks like, what outcomes it can have and how sustainable it can be. They deserve our joint support for their work, instead of being left alone to do the tasks they are assigned to.

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