

What is the purpose? Career guidance, professional identity and democracy

Conceptual
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Bo Klindt Poulsen

Associate Professor, VIA University College, Denmark.

For correspondence

Bo Klindt Poulsen: bokp@via.dk

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Abstract

This article examines how the purpose of career guidance is articulated and embedded in professional identity. Drawing on professional identity theory and John Dewey's philosophy of education, it analyses contemporary articulations of purpose with particular attention to historical Danish policy texts. The analysis shows that contemporary formulations of purpose are often indirect, whereas earlier texts framed guidance as a democratic and educative practice. Although based on Danish material, the discussion speaks to wider international debates about the societal role and purpose of career guidance. The article argues that purpose should be understood as an immanent normative orientation embedded in professional practice.

Keywords: Career guidance, Professional identity, Purpose, Democracy, Ethics, Philosophy of education

Introduction

Career guidance is frequently described through its functions, methods and intended outcomes. In many contemporary policy frameworks, it is expected to support educational and occupational transitions, enhance employability and contribute to broader societal goals.

Alongside such orientations, a growing body of research and professional debate emphasises the wider social and democratic significance of career guidance (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen 2018, 2019). Recent collaborative initiatives call for the development

of critical and socially responsive approaches to career theory and practice (Hooley et al. 2025). These contributions highlight the importance of addressing inequality, precarity and ecological challenges within career guidance.

Within this broader landscape, a fundamental question warrants renewed attention: What is the professional purpose of career guidance? Not only in terms of policy objectives or political commitments, but as a normative orientation embedded in professional practice itself. The present article develops its argument primarily through the philosophy of John Dewey, focusing on purpose as an immanent normative orientation embedded in professional practice.

This article explores career guidance as a formative and democratic practice inspired by John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. From this perspective, purpose is understood as an immanent orientation that organises professional action and gives coherence to practice. Career guidance is approached as an activity concerned with cultivating understanding, participation and democratic agency through the organisation of experience.

By examining historical articulations of purpose alongside contemporary formulations, the article seeks to clarify how democratic formation can function as a core dimension of professional identity in career guidance. Purpose, understood as an immanent normative orientation embedded in practice, provides coherence and legitimacy to professional action. It articulates not merely what career guidance does, but why it does it, and how its activities are justified in relation to broader democratic values. When purpose is not actively reflected upon and articulated within professional practice, identity risks becoming fragmented and primarily shaped by shifting policy formulations, rather than sustained by a coherent normative orientation. The article is situated in a Danish context, where career guidance has developed in close relation to the welfare state and the education system and has historically been organised as a publicly provided, largely education-based service.

Career guidance has not only been understood as a technical service, but as part of a wider educational and societal project linked to broader ambitions concerning education, democracy and formation. This makes the Danish case analytically relevant for examining how professional purpose is articulated, transformed or weakened over time.

Against this background, the article addresses the following question:

How is the purpose of career guidance articulated and embedded in professional identity, and how can these articulations be understood in light of democratic and educative principles?

To address this question, the article combines perspectives from professional identity theory with a Deweyan understanding of education and democracy and analyses contemporary and historical articulations of guidance purpose in a Danish context.

Professional identity and purpose in career guidance

Professional identity can be understood as a collective and dynamic orientation concerning what characterises a profession, what it is responsible for, and how its practice is legitimised. As Heggen (2013), a Norwegian scholar of professional studies, argues,

professional identity is not merely a matter of individual self-understanding, but a shared and negotiated understanding developed through education, professional discourse and practice. It concerns the question of 'who we are' as professionals and what distinguishes one profession from others.

From this perspective, purpose plays a central role. Purpose does not simply refer to concrete tasks or objectives, but to the underlying justification of professional practice. It connects everyday professional activities to broader societal values and provides a basis for professional judgment in situations characterised by complexity and uncertainty. Purpose thus functions as a mediating concept between professional ethics, professional practice and societal mandate.

While ethical principles regulate how professionals ought to act in relation to those they guide, purpose concerns the broader question of how the profession understands and justifies its role in society.

Similarly, Wackerhausen (2009), a Danish professor of psychology, emphasises that professions are characterised not only by specialised knowledge and skills, but by a responsibility to reflect on the normative foundations of their practice. Professional work is always situated within a societal context and involves ethical and political dimensions. A profession's legitimacy therefore depends, at least in part, on its ability to articulate and critically reflect upon its purpose and role in society.

As professional theory suggests, professional identity is frequently articulated through descriptions of tasks, methods and areas of responsibility, while broader reflections on a profession's societal purpose remain less clearly formulated (Heggen, 2013; Wackerhausen, 2009). In guidance, this tendency can be observed in professional and policy texts that primarily define practice in terms of activities, target groups or ethical conduct in the guidance relationship. While such articulations are important, they do not necessarily amount to a collective reflection on the purpose of guidance as a profession. Rather than suggesting an absence of discussion about the purpose of career guidance, this article approaches the question from a different angle by examining how purpose is articulated and embedded in professional identity. From a professional-theoretical perspective, this raises the analytical question of whether guidance risks being understood primarily as a set of techniques rather than as a profession characterised by a distinct normative orientation and societal role.

Clarifying the relationship between purpose and professional identity is a prerequisite for understanding how guidance positions itself in relation to education, society and democracy, and how professional judgement is exercised and justified in practice.

The development of the guidance field and analytical approach

The field of career guidance has developed over time in close interaction with changes in education systems, labour markets and welfare state arrangements (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2018; Guichard, 2001). In the Danish context, guidance has been shaped by shifting expectations concerning social inclusion, employability and educational planning, as well as by broader debates about education, citizenship and participation. These developments have influenced not only how guidance is organised, but also the ways in which its purpose has been articulated in Denmark (Poulsen, 2024; Plant, 2009).

In the Danish context, as in several other national settings, the expansion and diversification of the guidance field have contributed to a less clearly articulated professional identity. In Denmark new tasks, institutional reforms and policy priorities have contributed to a situation in which guidance is expected to fulfil multiple and sometimes competing functions. In such a context, questions of purpose become particularly salient. When a profession's purpose is not explicitly articulated, it becomes vulnerable to being defined externally through policy objectives and administrative requirements (Poulsen, 2024).

Against this background, the article adopts a qualitative and text-oriented analytical approach. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview of policy developments, the analysis focuses on selected texts that are analytically significant for understanding how the purpose of career guidance has been articulated in a Danish context over time. These include contemporary legislative formulations and professional self-descriptions found in mission statements and ethical principles articulated by professional associations, as well as historical Danish policy texts in which guidance is explicitly linked to democratic and educative ambitions.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, the article introduces a Deweyan perspective on purpose, democracy and education, providing a philosophical framework for understanding purpose as an immanent normative principle embedded in practice. Then, contemporary articulations of guidance purpose in Denmark are examined. Afterwards, selected historical Danish texts are analysed, focusing on how they articulate guidance as part of a broader formative project concerned with reflective judgement and democratic participation. The analysis does not seek to explain why certain articulations dominate, but to examine their normative implications. Finally, the article brings these perspectives into discussion, exploring tensions, limitations and critical perspectives. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of treating purpose as an ongoing and contested dimension of professional identity.

Purpose, democracy and education: A Deweyan perspective

To examine purpose as a normative principle, this article draws on the work of the American philosopher John Dewey, particularly as articulated in *Democracy and Education*. Dewey's relevance lies not in offering a theory of career guidance as such, but in providing a philosophical framework for understanding how purpose operates within educative practices and how such practices are connected to democratic life.

For Dewey, democracy is not primarily a political or institutional arrangement, but 'a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 1916, p. 91). Understood in this way, democracy refers to a form of social life characterised by participation, communication and shared inquiry. Education is not oriented towards preparing individuals for a future democratic state but constitutes an integral part of democratic life as it unfolds. In a Scandinavian context, this understanding resonates with traditions of *dannelse* (*Bildung*), understood as the cultivation of judgement and participation in shared social life. However, Dewey's account differs from classical *Bildung* traditions by grounding formation in the continuous development and reinterpretation of experience, rather than in cultural transmission.

A central concern in Dewey's educational philosophy is the relationship between aims and practice. Dewey questions approaches to education in which purposes are defined in advance and applied to activity as fixed targets. When aims function in this way, educational practice tends to be organised around the fulfilment of predetermined objectives (Dewey, 1916; Brinkmann, 2013).

Dewey instead develops an understanding of educative purpose as something that arises within activity itself. By 'educative,' he refers to purposes that foster growth, inquiry and the expansion of experience. In this sense, aims operate as orienting commitments that guide activity while remaining responsive to what unfolds in practice. As he writes:

In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the distinction being only one of convenience. Every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved. (Dewey, 1916, p. 111)

Purpose, in this perspective, takes shape through the situations in which it is enacted. It guides action as a provisional orientation that is continuously informed by experience and open to revision through inquiry.

This understanding becomes clearer when applied to career guidance. Guidance conversations can be organised around achieving a specified placement or transition. They can also be organised as processes of shared inquiry, where experiences, interests and social contexts are explored and interpreted together. In the latter case, the guiding purpose of the activity is closely connected to the development of reflective judgement, illustrating Dewey's point that purposes may emerge within activity rather than being imposed as external ends.

When career guidance is approached as an educative practice in Dewey's sense, attention turns to how participation is organised within the guidance process itself. For Dewey, democratic life depends on forms of participation in which individuals take part in shared inquiry and communication. The democratic quality of guidance therefore concerns how individuals are invited into inquiry, how possibilities are examined, and how social conditions shaping educational and occupational pathways are made part of reflection. Participation is therefore structured in ways that recognise individuals as capable of judgement and contribution.

Dewey's concept of experience further illuminates this orientation. Experience is socially situated and shaped by the conditions in which it unfolds. Educative experiences widen horizons of understanding by connecting personal concerns with shared social realities (Dewey, 1916; Brinkmann, 2013). In guidance practice this may involve examining how educational systems are structured, how labour markets distribute opportunities, or how cultural expectations influence aspirations.

From this standpoint, the purpose of career guidance is realised through how its practices are organised: through communicative processes that cultivate reflection, understanding and participation in shared social life.

Within this perspective, an articulation of professional identity that remains confined to supporting individual decision-making may express an important value, yet it leaves open the question of how the profession understands its collective societal and democratic orientation.

This Deweyan perspective offers a normative framework by directing analytical attention to how guidance practices organise participation, shape experience and cultivate judgment. It therefore enables an examination of whether articulations of purpose in career guidance emphasise externally defined objectives or are embedded in educative and democratic orientations.

Contemporary articulations of purpose

This section examines contemporary articulations of the purpose of career guidance in a Danish context, drawing on legislation, professional self-descriptions and selected international frameworks. While such international formulations are available, they do not appear to function as shared or structuring reference points within national professional discourse, as reflected in the texts analysed here. As a result, purpose is articulated unevenly and often indirectly.

The analysis of these contemporary articulations focuses on recent policy and professional framings of career guidance. Later in the article, earlier Danish formulations from the mid-twentieth century are revisited – formulations in which guidance was articulated more explicitly in relation to democratic and educative ambitions – thereby widening the perspective on how professional purpose may be understood and highlighting how historical articulations of purpose may inform contemporary discussions about the societal role of career guidance.

In current Danish legislation concerning career guidance, purpose is articulated through references to contribution, benefit and system-level outcomes. Guidance is framed as serving both the individual and society, often through broad formulations that emphasise effectiveness, transitions and societal usefulness. A typical formulation states that guidance should contribute 'to the greatest possible benefit for the individual and society' [Danish Parliament, 2024; Danish Parliament, 2021].

Such formulations appear inclusive and uncontroversial, yet they are normatively underdetermined. While they specify that guidance should be beneficial, they do not clarify what constitutes benefit, how competing interpretations of individual and societal interests should be weighed, or which ethical principles should guide professional judgment in cases of conflict. Purpose is thus articulated as a generalised objective rather than as a principled orientation embedded in professional practice. A principled orientation would make explicit the normative commitments guiding professional judgment that is, the values and principles that inform how guidance counsellors interpret and balance individual aspirations, social conditions and institutional expectations. For instance, this concerns how guidance relates individual aspirations to social conditions, and how tensions between personal preference and societal demands are addressed within professional judgment. Without such clarification, practitioners may lack a shared basis for handling such tensions, leaving professional judgment more vulnerable to externally defined policy priorities or administrative requirements.

Importantly, these legislative formulations do not explicitly connect career guidance to broader educational or democratic aims. Concepts such as democratic participation or citizenship, understood here in the Deweyan sense of participation in shared social inquiry, are either absent or only implicitly present. As a result, purpose is framed primarily in functional terms, emphasising outcomes while leaving the normative orientation of practice largely unspecified. The analytical issue concerns the articulation of purpose as a broadly defined external objective that lacks sufficient normative specification to guide professional judgment.

If we turn to the professional community of career guidance in Denmark, it is similarly difficult to find elaborated accounts of a professional identity or sustained reflections on the overarching societal purpose of guidance (not to be confused with concrete political objectives). On its website, under the heading 'Who are we?', the Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors describes itself as 'a nationwide professional association for guidance practitioners' (Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors, n.d.). The association outlines a number of political and professional goals it works towards, such as placing guidance on the political agenda and ensuring access to lifelong professional guidance for all.

However, the association's website does not present a coherent articulation of the professional identity of guidance, understood here as a collective account of the profession's role, normative commitments and societal orientation, or what Heggen refers to as the question of 'who we are as professionals.' In other professions, such articulations are sometimes formulated more explicitly, for example in the professional ideals developed by the Danish Union of Teachers, where the core purpose and normative ideals of the profession are explicitly discussed (Danish Union of Teachers, 2002).

The Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors refers to the document Principles for Ethics in Guidance, which it endorses as the foundation for all guidance practice. These principles were developed in 2006 by the now dissolved FUE, the Joint Council for Associations of Educational and Vocational Guidance Counsellors. Here, we move closer to an articulation of professional identity, as educational and vocational guidance is initially described as:

a process that takes place through an interplay of information, teaching, practical activities and individual conversations, and which can form the basis for choices of education, occupation and career pathways, as well as the living conditions associated with these choices. (Danish Association of Guidance Counsellors, n.d.)

While professional identity may indeed be expressed through the form of practice, the definition offered here describes guidance primarily as a procedural arrangement rather than as a normatively oriented practice. Although the description emphasises individual choice processes, it does not explicitly articulate the broader societal or normative orientation of the profession.

Later, 'the profession's distinctive characteristics' are mentioned, yet these are not further specified or conceptually developed. Under the heading 'Ethics and the good life', it is stated that it is 'a fundamental value of guidance to promote the citizen's welfare and living conditions'. Here, an overarching reflection on the collective identity and purpose of guidance is in fact articulated – an indication of what guidance, in value terms, should work towards: the welfare and living conditions of the citizen. That the ethical principles focus

on the individual, both in their definition of guidance and in the values they emphasise as guiding principles for practice, is not surprising. The main emphasis of the principles is precisely on ethical considerations and principles that the guidance counsellor must uphold in the relationship with the individual being guided. However central and valuable principles for ethics in guidance may be, they are not in themselves constitutive of a professional identity. Ethical principles regulate how professionals ought to act in relation to individuals. They primarily concern the ethical conduct of practitioners within the guidance relationship rather than the broader societal role and orientation of the profession as a whole. Articulating a professional purpose, by contrast, involves specifying the collective societal role and orientation of the profession as a whole. While promoting individuals' welfare may express an important value, it does not in itself clarify how the profession understands its broader contribution to society.

In an international guidance context, several attempts have been made to define a professional identity for guidance. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) defines guidance as follows:

Educational and vocational guidance and career counselling services assist people with learning and work decisions across the lifespan as well as conceptualising and understanding their work lives and help them to strengthen their personal agency by developing skills, knowledge, attitudes and values to manage their careers.

(IAEVG, n.d.)

In response to Heggen's question 'Who are we?', this definition provides a relatively clear and coherent answer: guidance and guidance practitioners help individuals with concrete decisions, perceptions and understandings of education and working life, and support individuals' agency. This definition offers a clear and widely recognisable account of guidance practice, emphasising support for individuals' agency and decision-making. At the same time, the articulation of professional identity remains centred on the individual and leaves the profession's broader societal orientation implicit.

Career guidance scholars Hooley et al. (2018, p. 20), drawing on a critical theoretical perspective, define career guidance in the following way:

Career guidance supports individuals to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures. Key to this is developing individual and community capacity to analyse and problematise assumptions and power relations, to network and build solidarity and to create new and shared opportunities. It empowers individuals and groups to struggle within the world as it is and to imagine the world as it could be.

In contrast to the IAEVG definition, this formulation articulates a professional identity for guidance that does not solely concern support for the individual, but also understands itself in relation to groups, communities and society. That is, the context in which individuals are always already embedded. In my view, this definition offers significant potential for reflection on and development of professional identity and purpose in guidance, if taken into dialogue with guidance practice and explored in terms of how it may be meaningfully enacted.

Taken together, these internal articulations show that, alongside the functional language of legislation, contemporary professional discourse also contains normative aspirations concerning identity and purpose. However, these aspirations rarely function as structuring principles for professional identity or practice, and they remain vulnerable to being overshadowed by externally defined objectives articulated through legislation and governance frameworks.

Historical articulations of career guidance as a democratic practice

In a Danish context, where public discussions of the purpose and professional identity of career guidance appear limited today, it is possible to draw on two key documents from the early history of Danish career guidance that engage in principled discussions of the societal purpose of guidance. These are a report from the Youth Commission (1945–1952) on public vocational guidance in Denmark and the so-called 'Blue Report' (1960-61), named after the blue covers of the two-volume report, that formed the basis for the post-1958 reform of compulsory schooling in Denmark.

The establishment of a nationwide public system of vocational guidance in schools took place in the years following the German occupation of 1940-1945, first as a pilot scheme from 1946 in selected municipalities and later as a nationwide provision from 1953 (Plant, 2009). The recommendation to establish nationwide vocational guidance in schools came in particular from the Youth Commission appointed by the post-liberation government, whose mandate was to examine 'the special problems and needs of young people and, on that basis, to propose appropriate measures' (Youth Commission, 1946).

The Youth Commission was highly influential in shaping post-war Danish educational and social policy, and it must be understood within a broader post-war effort to strengthen democratic life in Denmark after five years of occupation. Its chair, Hal Koch, was a central public intellectual in the Danish democracy debate and the author of the influential book *What is Democracy?* (1945), in which democracy is conceptualised as a way of life grounded in dialogue, participation and mutual understanding. From this perspective, democratic institutions alone are insufficient; democracy depends on forms of education and social practice that cultivate democratic dispositions.

This understanding of democracy as a lived and learned practice forms an important backdrop to the Commission's reflections on career guidance. In its report, the Youth Commission frames vocational guidance as an integral part of the democratisation of Danish society. In a democratic society, the right to choose one's occupation freely is regarded as a fundamental right. However, the Commission emphasises that this right has never been fully realised:

In our democratic society, the right to freely choose one's occupation is regarded as a fundamental right. However, this principle has never been fully realised, as society has never been structured in such a way that free occupational choice for all could be practised. One need only point to the social and economic barriers that exist in our society and that, to this day, prevent many from attaining a position within working life that corresponds to their abilities. In addition, geographical and tradition-based obstacles must be taken into account. (Youth Commission 1946, pp. VIII–IX, author's translation)

Publicly accessible vocational guidance in schools is thus presented as a means of supporting the realisation of this democratic right. The purpose of guidance is to expand young people's knowledge of occupational possibilities as widely as possible, since one cannot exercise free choice without an understanding of what is available to choose from. As the Commission formulates it:

[Young people must] be provided with orientation and guidance in such a way that occupational choice takes place with consideration of as many occupational possibilities as possible, and not merely those few of which the individual young person currently has an overview. It is precisely in this respect that vocational guidance intervenes. (Youth Commission 1946, p. IX, author's translation)

In this sense, vocational guidance is understood not as an instrument of allocation or control, but as a practice that seeks to broaden experience and support reflective choice as part of a democratic way of life.

An echo of the Youth Commission's understanding of vocational guidance as part of democratisation can be found in The Blue Report, the influential national curriculum guidance for compulsory schooling published in 1960. The report laid the foundation for significant changes in Danish schooling in a reform-pedagogical direction (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014).

The Blue Report includes a chapter on vocational orientation, which was introduced into compulsory schooling with the Danish School Act of 1958. In the analysis presented here, vocational orientation is understood as part of a broader guidance effort, in continuity with the Youth Commission and the Blue Report.

In The Blue Report, vocational orientation is explicitly understood as part of the school's general educational task. It is not limited to supporting individual choice, but is assigned a broader formative purpose that links knowledge, reflection and social understanding:

Vocational orientation furthermore serves a general formative purpose, not only through civic education as such, but also through concrete knowledge of different occupations and educational pathways. This includes contributing to the counteraction of certain prejudices and misconceptions about occupational conditions that children often acquire from their surroundings, and which both hinder their reflections regarding occupational choice and impair understanding between social groups, thereby making it more difficult to dismantle irrational barriers to free occupational choice. (The Blue Report, 1960, pp. 220–221, original emphases, author's translation)

Vocational orientation is thus framed as an educational practice that contributes both to individual reflection and to understanding between social groups. Insight into occupations and educational pathways is itself considered part of general education and a prerequisite for meaningful participation in a democratic society.

Viewed through Dewey's conception of democracy as a way of life, the historical articulations of career guidance analysed above can be understood as accounts of career guidance as an educative practice rather than as a technical service. For Dewey, democracy

depends on individuals' ability to relate personal experience to shared social conditions, and education plays a central role in enabling such connections (Dewey, 1916).

The Youth Commission's insistence on guidance as orientation rather than direction, and The Blue Report's emphasis on vocational orientation as a formative task, resonate with Dewey's critique of externally imposed educational aims. In both texts, guidance is valued not for producing predetermined outcomes, such as specific educational placements, rapid transitions into employment or predefined labour market matches, but for expanding horizons of experience, supporting reflective judgment and enabling individuals to understand the social conditions shaping their lives.

From this perspective, the democratic significance of guidance lies not in its contribution to labour market efficiency, but in its role in organising experience in ways that make reflection and understanding possible. Career guidance becomes a site where individuals can connect their personal trajectories with broader social realities, thereby participating in democratic life as an educative process.

Taken together, the historical texts analysed in this section articulate career guidance as a practice oriented towards democratisation through understanding rather than direction. They suggest that guidance can contribute to democratic life by enabling individuals to relate their own experiences, choices and aspirations to broader social conditions and shared ways of living. This conception points beyond guidance as orientation alone and raises a further question: how might career guidance foster an understanding of how one's experiences and choices relate to democratic and social life as an internal and enduring dimension of professional purpose? It is this question that the following section addresses.

Discussion: Career guidance, democracy and professional purpose

The preceding analysis highlighted how 'understanding between social groups' was articulated in The Blue Report as part of the democratic purpose of career guidance. If such understanding forms part of the profession's normative orientation, its uncertain status in contemporary guidance discourse becomes professionally significant. Also today, 'understanding between social groups' can be understood as being under pressure in Danish society. Danish professors of political science Binderkrantz, Pedersen and Petersen (2024) point to increasing divisions in Danish society. These divisions are not limited to party politics or political blocs, but also concern questions of gender, equality and identity politics. Marked political differences are also linked to geography, such as whether one lives in a large city or outside urban areas.

In a similar vein, Olsen et al. (2021) point to substantial social divides in contemporary Denmark and show how these developments result in concrete physical separation between groups with different levels of education and income. One example is the concentration of higher education and higher incomes in large cities, while lower levels of education and reliance on public welfare transfers such as unemployment or social assistance benefits are more prevalent in peripheral areas.

In a context characterised by increasing division and separation between social groups, the more than 60-year-old reflections found in The Blue Report and the Youth Commission's

recommendations on the democratic and broadly educative purpose of career orientation and career guidance may usefully be reactivated in contemporary discussions of the purpose of career guidance. These reflections suggest that career guidance can support the realisation of a democratic way of life and contribute to improved understanding between social groups and ways of living.

The recommendations of the Youth Commission and The Blue Report provide a basis for talking about and thinking about the purpose of career guidance that, in my view, is just as relevant today as it was in 1946 and 1960. Naturally, the language and some of the approaches in the two texts are dated, and the concrete contexts of guidance have changed significantly. However, when reading beyond the historically specific formulations, the texts offer an understanding of career guidance that can still function as a valuable interlocutor in contemporary discussions of the profession's purpose and identity.

In this respect, the Youth Commission's recommendations and The Blue Report align with the understanding of career guidance as emancipatory and transformative found in the work of Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen. At the same time, the two historical texts contribute something further by anchoring the question of the purpose of career guidance as a profession in democracy: as an important element in the realisation of a democratic way of life. In the Danish context, this analysis suggests that democracy may be understood as a central normative horizon for the professional identity of career guidance; an element made explicit in the two historical texts, though less clearly articulated in contemporary professional discourse.

The Youth Commission's recommendations and The Blue Report thus provide examples of how a societal purpose of career guidance can be connected to the concrete tasks and practices of guidance. In this way, they demonstrate how a societal purpose can be concretely embedded in everyday guidance practices rather than remaining an abstract policy objective.

Viewed through Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, the argument developed above can be understood as an account of career guidance as an educative practice in the strongest sense. For Dewey, democracy is not primarily a political system, but a way of life that depends on individuals' ability to connect personal experience with shared social conditions (Dewey, 1916). Education plays a crucial role in fostering such connections by enabling reflection, interpretation and judgment.

Career guidance, as described in the Danish historical texts, can be understood as precisely such a practice. By helping individuals relate their aspirations, choices and experiences to educational pathways and occupational arrangements, guidance supports the development of what Dewey would describe as reflective experience. Democratic understanding emerges when individuals are enabled to inquire into their situations and to form judgments in light of shared social conditions.

In this sense, career guidance may be understood as a form of career learning grounded in reflective inquiry. Guidance does not simply transmit information or direct decisions, but organises experience in ways that support individuals in interpreting their past experiences, considering possible futures and situating themselves within broader educational and social contexts.

Dewey insists that democratic education cannot be governed solely by external aims or predefined outcomes. When education is subordinated to instrumental objectives, its capacity to support growth and democratic life is weakened. Applied to career guidance, this suggests that its democratic potential depends less on what it delivers and more on how it is practiced: as an open, educative process that cultivates understanding and judgment.

The conception of career guidance articulated in the Youth Commission and The Blue Report also resonates with contemporary critical perspectives that emphasise the humanising and transformative potential of guidance when it resists reduction to employability or labour market efficiency (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007; Hyslop-Margison, 2002; Hooley et al., 2025). Recent efforts to develop a more coherent body of critical career theory explicitly frame career guidance as a site for examining power, inequality and the political economy of work, and for cultivating forms of agency that extend beyond adaptation to existing structures (Hooley et al., 2025).

What is at stake here is a reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and society. Democratic understanding involves recognising how lives are shaped by social arrangements, while also acknowledging the possibility of critique and change. Career guidance that fosters such understanding treats individuals as participants in democratic life rather than solely as future workers.

This perspective also clarifies why explicit professional reflection on purpose matters. When the democratic and educative orientation of career guidance is not actively articulated and sustained within the profession, it risks being replaced by externally defined frameworks that emphasise efficiency, transition and system-level outcomes. In this sense, questions of purpose are inseparable from questions of professional legitimacy and responsibility.

Conclusion

This article has argued that questions of purpose are central to the professional identity of career guidance and cannot be reduced to functional objectives or policy-defined outcomes. Through analyses of contemporary articulations of purpose and historical Danish policy texts, the article shows how career guidance has been understood as a democratic and educative practice grounded in normative assumptions about freedom, judgement and participation.

Although the analysis is grounded in a Danish context, the questions raised concerning purpose, professional identity and democratic orientation resonate with wider international debates on professionalisation in career guidance.

A central implication of the analysis is that explicit reflection on purpose is integral to professional identity. Where such reflection remains implicit or underdeveloped, the normative orientation of career guidance becomes less visible and more susceptible to being framed through policy and governance discourses. In this sense, questions of purpose are closely connected to questions of professional legitimacy and ethical responsibility.

Understanding purpose as a normative orientation brings into view how career guidance is justified and enacted as professional practice. From this perspective, democracy functions

as the normative framework within which guidance takes place and professional judgment is exercised. Democracy, understood as a way of life, is realised through participation in shared practices of inquiry, deliberation and judgment. Conceived in this way, career guidance contributes to democratic life by shaping how individuals engage with education, work and society as participants in shared social practices rather than as objects of policy or administration.

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