

Career counselling in a highly constrained context: ethical reflections from a school-based pilot in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Career guidance is often framed around informed choice and individual agency, yet these principles are tested in contexts where opportunity structures are severely constrained. Drawing on routine documentation from a school-based counselling pilot in three secondary schools in Freetown, Sierra Leone, this article presents a practice-based ethical analysis. Situating the pilot within small-state career guidance research, it examines how professional principles, including those of the IAEVG, require contextual interpretation. The article argues that ethical career counselling in low-resource settings depends on enacting universal standards through locally grounded practice.

Keywords: career counselling; ethics; school-based guidance; Sierra Leone; youth transitions

Introduction

Transitions from school to adulthood are challenging in most societies. In Sierra Leone, they are particularly complex. Young people face limited access to tertiary education, a narrow formal labour market, and high levels of underemployment. Secondary schooling

remains one of the few structured institutions most young people engage with, making schools a critical site for career development support.

Formal career guidance has largely been absent from Sierra Leone's secondary education system. Career decisions are typically shaped by family expectations, peer influence, perceived social prestige, and limited information about pathways, costs, and alternatives. Professions associated with status and stability, such as medicine, engineering, or law, are frequently prioritised, even when structural capacity to absorb graduates is extremely limited.

In November 2024, a pilot placing career counsellors in senior secondary schools was launched in Freetown through collaboration between Skool Grind and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. The programme aimed to support students aged 16–21 through structured, individual counselling sessions focused on exploration, reflection, and practical planning.

This article reflects on the first six months of that pilot. Rather than offering a formal evaluation, it presents a practice-based ethical reflection. It asks what it means to practise career counselling ethically in a context where aspirations routinely exceed opportunity, and where established professional principles must be interpreted under conditions of scarcity.

Career guidance in low- and middle-income contexts raises distinct ethical challenges, particularly where labour markets are narrow and educational opportunities limited (Watts, 2009; Blustein, 2006). Much dominant career theory assumes diversified opportunity structures; in constrained contexts, principles such as autonomy and informed choice require contextual interpretation.

National and educational context: Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is a coastal West African country with a population of approximately 8.6 million people and a markedly young demographic profile: 38 per cent of the population is under the age of 15 (World Bank, 2024a, 2024b). English is the official language of government and education, while Krio functions as the primary lingua franca across ethnic and regional groups. Since independence from the United Kingdom in 1961, the country's development trajectory has been shaped by political instability and economic fragility.

The civil war (1991–2002) severely disrupted social infrastructure, including education. Schools were destroyed or damaged, teachers displaced, and learning interrupted for many children (UNICEF, 2019). Although reconstruction efforts have improved access, the effects of conflict continue to influence educational participation and perceptions of opportunity.

The formal education system follows a 6–3–3 structure: six years of primary schooling, three years of junior secondary, and three years of senior secondary. While primary enrolment is relatively high, continuation through secondary levels declines significantly (World Bank, 2023). Transition to tertiary education is limited, and only a small minority of adults have completed post-secondary study (World Bank, 2019). The formal labour market similarly absorbs only a small proportion of school leavers.

These structural features mean that access to higher education and formal employment is highly competitive. Understanding this constrained opportunity structure is essential for

interpreting both the aspirations students express in counselling and the ethical tensions encountered in practice.

The pilot programme and methodology

The pilot placed trained career counsellors in three senior secondary schools in Freetown: Prince of Wales School (boys-only), Ahmadiyya Secondary School (co-educational), and Services Secondary School (co-educational). Selected in collaboration with the Ministry, these schools represent relatively well-resourced urban institutions.

Counsellors were recruited based on relevant educational qualifications and demonstrated interest in youth development. All held post-secondary qualifications in education or related social science fields. Prior to deployment, they received structured, contextually adapted training addressing career development practice, counselling ethics, non-directive approaches, documentation procedures, and the Sierra Leonean education and labour market landscape. Ongoing reflective supervision was provided through regular meetings with programme leadership.

Students aged 16–21 were invited to attend three to four individual counselling sessions during the academic year, focusing on career exploration, educational pathways, perceived barriers, family expectations, and practical next steps. In each session, the counsellor built on previously discussed topics and introduced additional questions depending on the number of prior sessions and the student's year group. Between November 2024 and May 2025, 531 students participated in 982 counselling sessions. A descriptive summary of these data is presented in a programme report (Caminor Foundation, 2025). As one school is boys-only, the dataset reflects a gender imbalance.

Data collection and analysis

Data derive from routine documentation produced during counselling sessions rather than interviews conducted specifically for research purposes. After each session, counsellors recorded structured summaries in a digital logging system used for programme monitoring and continuity of care. Records included demographic information, stated aspirations, perceived barriers, family influence, and agreed next steps.

Anonymised administrative data were reviewed using descriptive and inductive approaches. Patterns in aspirations were identified, and counsellor notes were examined to explore recurring ethical tensions. Themes were not predetermined but emerged through iterative reading and discussion. The analysis is exploratory and interpretive rather than statistically inferential. This article should therefore be understood as a practice-based reflective analysis of administrative data rather than a formal empirical research study.

Small-state context and implications for guidance design

Although Sierra Leone's population exceeds eight million, it shares structural features identified in small-state research on career guidance. Sultana (2006) argues that in economically concentrated states, limited labour market diversification, high occupational visibility, and restricted internal mobility intensify competition for a narrow range of elite roles. Sierra Leone's formal economy absorbs only a small proportion of school leavers,

while professional pathways remain highly concentrated and socially prestigious. In such contexts, aspiration is shaped not only by personal interest but by the structure of opportunity itself, amplifying the gap between ambition and feasibility.

Sultana (2006) also observes that in many small states, career guidance is frequently incorporated into teachers' responsibilities rather than delivered by specialised counsellors, reflecting limited institutional capacity and resource constraints. In Sierra Leone, career guidance is formally recognised in The Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (Government of Sierra Leone, 2023), which affirms the importance of counselling and guidance within secondary education.

However, legislative recognition has not yet translated into systematic implementation in schools. Where guidance is left to subject teachers, effective delivery requires labour market knowledge and counselling competence that cannot simply be assumed across teaching staff. In practice, structured provision remains limited. The pilot therefore prioritised sustained individual counselling by trained practitioners rather than classroom-based or teacher-led activities. In a constrained environment, deeper engagement at the individual level was necessary to support informed decision-making in ways that generic career lessons could not achieve.

The role and ethical positioning of the career counsellor

Career counsellors occupy a position of ethical weight. They are often among the few adults whose role is to discuss the future without assessment or discipline.

Counsellors act as interpreters of complex systems—educational requirements, training pathways, labour market realities—that are largely opaque to students and families. Even when counsellors explicitly avoid directive advice, students may still attribute authority to their words. Ethical practice therefore requires continuous attention to influence, not only intention.

There is also a risk that counsellors become informal substitutes for absent policy infrastructure. When counselling compensates for missing labour market information, weak transition systems, or limited post-school support, ethical responsibility can become blurred. The pilot deliberately frames counsellors as facilitators of thinking, not planners of outcomes, but this boundary must be actively maintained.

Acknowledging counsellor positionality is therefore central to ethical practice. It requires humility about what counselling can achieve, clarity about what it cannot, and reflexivity about how power operates even in ostensibly non-directive interactions.

The pilot operates in the absence of a formalised national career education curriculum, comprehensive labour market information systems accessible to schools, or established post-school transition structures. In this context, counsellors frequently compensate for systemic gaps that would elsewhere be distributed across institutions. This further intensifies the ethical complexity of their role.

Early patterns in student aspirations

Several consistent patterns emerged across counselling sessions. Student aspirations clustered strongly around a limited number of high-status professions. Careers in the

health sector—particularly becoming a medical doctor—were dominant, with engineering and technology-related roles also frequently cited. These preferences reflect perceived prestige and associations with stability and upward mobility.

Interest in teaching as a profession was notably low, despite the country's need for qualified educators. This may reflect occupational prestige hierarchies, whereby roles perceived as offering limited economic mobility are excluded early in the aspiration process (Gottfredson, 2002). The pattern therefore signals broader social valuation of professions rather than isolated individual preference.

Entrepreneurship was frequently mentioned but often framed as a secondary option should university plans not materialise. This positioning suggests both the scarcity of formal employment and a perceived hierarchy between professional careers and self-employment.

A smaller group of students initially described themselves as undecided. For these individuals, counselling sessions provided structured space to clarify interests, constraints, and possible pathways. In some cases, students refined or adjusted their plans after researching requirements or exploring related roles. Counselling did not consistently lead to changed aspirations—and nor should it. The ethical value often lay not in altering goals but in expanding understanding.

The gender distribution of participants reflects the inclusion of one boys-only school, resulting in a higher proportion of male students overall. Within the available data, aspirations towards medicine and engineering were more frequently expressed by male students, while female students more often articulated interest in health-related and socially oriented roles. Although not statistically representative, these patterns align with broader evidence that occupational aspirations are shaped by gendered socialisation and cultural expectations. In constrained labour markets, such norms may further influence how feasibility and desirability are perceived, underscoring the importance of gender awareness in career guidance practice.

Ethics, philosophies, and principles in constrained contexts

Ethical practice in career guidance is shaped not only by philosophical ideas but by professional frameworks. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2025) sets out globally applicable ethical principles, including respect for dignity and autonomy, cultural sensitivity, social justice, and commitment to equity. These principles are articulated as universal standards, yet are largely framed through individualised concepts of self-direction and informed choice.

In Sierra Leone, where career decisions are deeply embedded in family expectations, communal obligations, and resource constraints, such principles require contextual interpretation rather than simple application. Respect for autonomy, for example, cannot be understood solely as individual self-determination but must be negotiated within relational and intergenerational dynamics.

The applicability of such guidelines in Sierra Leone cannot be assumed in abstract terms but must be examined through practice. For example, the IAEVG emphasis on respect for autonomy and client self-direction presupposes that career choice is primarily an individual decision. In the pilot, however, counsellors routinely encountered situations in which

family expectations and communal obligations shaped aspirations as strongly as personal preference. Rather than treating this as a deviation from ethical norms, counsellors worked to interpret autonomy relationally, supporting students in articulating their own views while recognising the legitimacy of family involvement. In this sense, IAEVG principles were not rejected but enacted through local social realities.

The notion of informed choice presupposes the existence of meaningful alternatives. Sen's (1999) capability approach distinguishes between formal freedom and substantive opportunity: the right to choose is insufficient if realistically attainable options are severely restricted. Where access to tertiary education is limited and labour markets absorb few school leavers, the gap between aspiration and feasible opportunity is often considerable. Ethical career guidance in such settings cannot be confined to information provision but must attend to the real capabilities and constraints shaping students' futures. This does not negate autonomy but situates it within material constraints.

Ethical reflections from practice

Aspiration and feasibility

Encouraging aspiration while acknowledging structural constraint remains a central ethical tension. Optimism and ambition can be motivationally important, yet affirming highly improbable pathways risks fostering expectations unlikely to be realised. Supporting aspiration must therefore be coupled with realistic appraisal of available opportunities. Ethical practice involves holding possibility and feasibility in tension—neither extinguishing ambition nor ignoring material limits.

Neutrality, influence, and responsibility

Non-directiveness is widely regarded as a professional principle, but neutrality is difficult where constraints are predictable. When a student relies on a single unlikely pathway, inaction may itself shape the trajectory. In response, counsellors adopted structured challenge—encouraging research, exploration of adjacent roles, and discussion with family members—seeking to balance respect for agency with responsible engagement.

Family, prestige, and social pressure

Career decision-making in Sierra Leone is deeply relational. Family expectations and social prestige strongly influence aspirations, and some students report pressure to pursue particular professions irrespective of personal interest. Counselling therefore often involves supporting students in navigating these dynamics rather than treating career choice as purely individual. Dominant guidance models, often grounded in individualised notions of autonomy, may insufficiently account for such relational contexts. Ethical practice in this setting requires recognising that agency is exercised within family and community networks.

Entrepreneurship and risk

Entrepreneurship is frequently presented as a response to youth unemployment, yet it transfers economic risk to individuals. Counsellors approached it cautiously, emphasising small-scale experimentation and incremental learning rather than idealised narratives of success.

Limits of the pilot and unresolved ethical questions

The pilot operates within clear structural limits. The data reflect a short time horizon, an urban sample, and early-stage counselling relationships. Career counselling cannot expand university places, diversify labour markets, or resolve structural unemployment.

As Watts (2009) cautions, guidance interventions cannot compensate for systemic economic constraints. Where policy infrastructures are weak, counselling risks managing expectations rather than expanding opportunity. Recognising these limits prevents overstating the transformative potential of guidance alone.

Important questions remain. Does early counselling mitigate later frustration or merely postpone it? How should practitioners respond when aspirational pathways repeatedly fail?

Framing the programme as a learning system rather than a finished model allows such questions to remain open and underscores the iterative nature of ethical practice.

Implications and concluding reflections

Early reflections from this pilot suggest that career counselling in highly constrained contexts requires greater ethical attentiveness, not lower expectations. Principles such as informed choice, autonomy, and neutrality remain vital, but must be interpreted in light of structural realities rather than assumed universality.

For practitioners, this means accepting ethical discomfort as part of professional responsibility. For policymakers, it underscores the importance of introducing career guidance early, before aspirations harden without reference to feasibility. For the wider field, it highlights the value of learning from contexts where constraint is explicit rather than implicit.

The reflections presented here suggest that career guidance in small states may face intensified versions of tensions familiar elsewhere: limited diversification magnifies aspiration–feasibility gaps, and personalised networks complicate neutrality. Recognising the influence of scale allows ethical debates in career development to be situated within their structural context rather than framed solely as professional dilemmas.



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