



Pupils and parents - An overlooked relationship in career guidance

Åsa Sundelin, PhD and senior lecturer, Stockholm University

Preamble

Parents play a crucial role in young people's career decisions, yet they are often overlooked within the field of career guidance. This article highlights both the challenges and opportunities involved in strengthening career counsellors' work with pupils and their parents.

The role of family in educational choices and career paths

In the field of career guidance, it is well recognised that family and social background have a significant impact on people's career choices and trajectories. The evidence shows young people from different socio-economic groups make different study and career choices. Furthermore, several career theories highlight the important role of

family background in career choices, for example, careership theory and social cognitive career theory.

Theories about how families influence their children vary. Within the social constructivist tradition, May and Nordqvist, for example, claim that humans are fundamentally relational, with our sense of self shaped by the relationships we are embedded in from birth. In other words, we make important life decisions with our loved ones in mind, whether we want to or not. An example of the important role played by our family relationships is J.M. Coetzee, who at the age of 63 received the Nobel Prize in Literature, and in a speech lamented that his mother could not be there: “And for whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers”?

Evidence from recent studies led by Barberis and Osman also indicate that parents, regardless of social background, play a significant role in their children's educational transitions, and that emotional support from parents is crucial for young people's sense of agency. A study in Sweden that I worked on alongside Lundahl and others, also shows that young people at risk of being marginalised often speak to their parents when choosing upper secondary education and reflecting on their future.

However, parents' ability to support their children's future varies depending on factors such as their socio-economic and educational background, family structure, and the quality of their relationship. Ule and colleagues claim that these issues are becoming more critical as parents are increasingly expected to have responsibility for their children's schooling. Career guidance can be a way to compensate for inequalities related to families' living conditions and social background. But it is also the case, as Barnes and colleagues identify, that involving parents in career guidance can be valuable in supporting them to support their children. This is especially urgent when parents, for various reasons, have challenges in supporting their children or when their children face challenges at school and during educational transitions.

Navigating parental involvement: Three key challenges for career counsellors

Involving parents in career counselling, however, comes with some challenges.

1. The first challenge concerns the ideal of autonomy in career guidance. Theories, practices and ethical guidelines for the profession emphasise the importance of supporting individuals in making independent choices – encouraging them to explore their own interests, values, and goals, and to make career decisions based on their self-understanding rather than on others' expectations or societal norms. While this ideal is important for several reasons, it risks oversimplifying the role of parents in pupils' educational choices and future. It may lead to the disregard of the relationships between pupils and their parents, which affect and influence career decisions for better or worse. Instead of supporting these relationships, career counselling may create distance. In practice, it may lead to counsellors not paying attention to how pupils relate to their parents' views or encouraging pupils to disregard their parents' opinions too easily.

2. The second challenge relates to balancing independence and dependence between pupils and parents. For example, when pupils in Sweden make their first major educational decision – choosing upper secondary education (USE) – most still live at home, are under legal age, and remain financially dependent on their families. At the same time, they are adolescents striving for greater independence and autonomy from their families. The regulations reinforce this independence by granting pupils the right to sign their USE application without parental consent. However, there are no clear boundaries between the roles and responsibilities of parents and pupils in this process and counsellors thus need to navigate this ambiguity.

3. The third challenge regards the lack of theoretical and methodological support for counsellors' work with pupils and parents. In addition, this topic receives limited attention in training programs. Consequently, counsellors are likely to rely more on personal experiences and assumptions than professional approaches when engaging with pupils

and their parents. Overall, working with pupils and parents is a complex task for which counsellors receive limited support.

Supporting parents in risky educational transitions: Insights from a Swedish study

Some insights into how career counsellors can work with parents are provided by a small-scale Swedish study that I and Anneli Öljärstrand conducted together which examines how schools collaborate with parents when pupils are at risk of not qualifying for upper secondary education (USE).

The aim of the study was to examine schools' formalised routines for parent contact, strategies for communication and the perception of school staff of parents' ability to support their children's educational transition. The study was conducted at two primary schools with a high proportion of pupils who do not qualify for USE. Pupils in Sweden who do not qualify for USE are referred to Introductory Programmes (IP). Lundahl and others' research showed that this transition is risky, often creating significant uncertainty about the future and potentially stigmatising pupils and parents.

Parents with high commitment but limited ability

Based on interviews with school staff, we developed a model illustrating four ideal types of parental ability and commitment in supporting their children's transition. *Ability* refers to aspects such as knowledge of the Swedish education system and parents' educational background while *commitment* refers to parents' overall perceived engagement in their child's future.



According to school staff, most parents of pupils in risky transitions are highly committed but have limited ability to support their children's transition to USE and IP, often due to life circumstances, educational background, and/or migration experiences. One dilemma that is highlighted is that parents may have overly high expectations of their children in relation to their school performance.

Support or takeover?

The study suggests that schools can focus their efforts on strengthening or compensating when parents have limited ability to support their children. One example of strengthening parents' ability is targeted parent meetings, which were specifically designed to support parents of pupils with Swedish as a second language in understanding the Swedish school system. Compensating, on the other hand, may involve the school working directly with pupils rather than meeting their parents to discuss transition-related issues. If the school compensates for parents' lack of ability, there is a risk that the school will take over the parents' responsibility and role, which might have negative consequences for the relationship between parent and child in the long run.

The study also highlighted that schools' strategies for engaging with parents can differ in terms of how formalised or needs-driven they are, as well as whether their approach is preventive or reactive. A more formalised and preventive approach is more likely to strengthen parents' ability and ensure equal treatment. This may involve offering these pupils and their parents meetings with the career guidance counsellor at an early stage to discuss possible educational options.

In interviews for this research, it is clear that conversations with these parents often involve both emotional and pedagogical challenges. Parents may become worried, upset, or even angry with their child, and explaining what an educational path at IP entails can be difficult. The career counsellors play a key role in providing parents with hope for their children's future and in addressing questions about the next steps. Counsellors thus need strong skills in managing emotionally charged conversations with parents, as well as solid pedagogical competence.

Towards socially just career guidance through work with parents

A conscious and strategic approach to working with parents can counteract limitations in study and career choices, thus representing a social justice approach to career guidance work. It is a complex task for which there is no easy or quick solution. Against this backdrop, this article has highlighted challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities in career guidance work with parents.

One key conclusion is that support for young people can be strengthened through a career guidance that actively promotes cooperation and mutual understanding between pupils and parents regarding pupils' educational futures. Central to this work is the facilitation of meaningful dialogues between pupils and parents – dialogues grounded in an understanding of the pivotal role their relationship plays in pupils' lives. In addition, career guidance should encourage pupils to reflect on how their parents influence their own thinking and decision-making. Further, seeking to strengthen parents' ability to support their children's choices, career counsellors can indirectly strengthen the support young people receive.

Developing the school's work with parents

The following four questions can be used to review and develop the work of counsellors and schools to strengthen parents' ability to support their children's educational choices and transitions:

1. How is the work with parents in relation to educational transitions organised, and to what extent is it formalised and preventive?
2. What is the ability of the parent group to support their children's schooling and educational choices? To what extent is the school's work based on the needs and situation of the parent group?
3. Is the work primarily focused on compensating for or strengthening parents' ability to support their children?

4. As a counsellor, do you have sufficient competence to engage in dialogue with parents to pupils in risky transitions? What do you need to improve? What support do you need and what is available to you?

To counteract limitations related to pupils' backgrounds, the field needs to strengthen counsellors' work with parents through research as well as theoretical and methodological development. It is essential to build knowledge and offer training so that counsellors are not left to handle work with parents on their own. This is particularly crucial when working with pupils and parents in vulnerable educational transitions. Counsellors need a solid foundation to act professionally.

Relationships in career guidance

In the «Relationships in Career Guidance» series, we explore contemporary research into the ways in which relationships influence career development, and the implications for career guidance practice.

Guest editor Rosie Alexander, postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University, has edited and prepared the texts in this series. To see the other texts in this series, please visit [Series: Relationships in career guidance](https://veiledederforum.no/series/relationships-in-career-guidance) | [Veiledederforum.no](https://veiledederforum.no)

This text was commissioned by [Veiledederforum.no](https://veiledederforum.no), an online resource for career guidance professionals managed by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills.

References

- Barberis E., Buchowicz I., De Luigi N (2016) Producing accessibility through discretionary practices of educational professionals. In: Walther A, Amaral MPD, Cuconato M, et al. (eds) *Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe: Pathways, Policy and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury, pp.117–137.
- Barnes, S. A., Bimrose, J., Brown, A., Gough, J., & Wright, S. (2020). The role of parents and carers in providing careers guidance and how they can be better supported. *International evidence report*, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/134365/>

- Hodkinson, P., & Sparkes, A. C. (1997). Careership: a sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569970180102>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- Lundahl, L., Lindgren, J., Rosvall, P.-Å. & Sundelin, Å. (2023). *Att komma vidare. Introduktionsprogram som stöd för unga i riskfyllda övergångar*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- May, V., & Nordqvist, P. (Eds.). (2019). *Sociology of personal life*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Osman A, Carlhed Ydhag C, Månsson N (2021) Recipe for educational success: A study of successful school performance of students from low social cultural background. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 30(4): 422–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2020.1764379>
- Sundelin, Å., & Öljärstrand, A. (2025). *Skolors arbete med föräldrar till elever i riskfyllda övergångar*. Slutrapport. FoU-nätverket för skolverksamheter med stora utmaningars skriftserie; 2025:1. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:2019670/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Ule M, Živoder A, du Bois-Reymond M (2015) ‘simply the best for my children’: Patterns of parental involvement in education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(3): 329–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.987852>