



# On the Professionalism and Professionalisation of Career Guidance and Counselling in Sweden

REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to describe and discuss professionalism and professionalisation of career guidance counselling in Sweden in relation to different logics of professional practice. The transformation of the labour market and the educational system in Sweden over the past decades has led to an increase in the importance of individual educational and occupational choices and development of career management skills in relation to individual trajectories based on personal interests. Also, individual agency has increased in importance in relation to the quantitative planning of secondary and tertiary education aiming to match supply and demand in the labour market. Within the dominant functionalistic technical-instrumental paradigm, which focus on individual agency and rational choices, the importance of career guidance and counselling has increasingly come into focus. Through the incorporation of market-oriented management logics in the welfare sector, the previously dominant logics of professional responsibility have in many professional groups been replaced by professional accountability. In Sweden, the process of professionalising the emerging semi-profession of career guidance and counselling is driven by policymakers. Rather than being defined by practising professionals, professionalism is externally defined in reports and policy documents shaped by elites and experts, outlining core competences in career guidance and counselling related to political objectives. The practice of career guidance and counselling is not strongly governed and there is little external evaluation. The professionals have autonomy and relatively high degrees of freedom in formulating problems and solutions, but little organisational support.

## ABSTRAKT

Syftet med denna artikel är att diskutera professionalism och professionalisering av studie- och yrkesvägledning i Sverige i relation till olika logiker för organisering av professionellt arbete. Arbetsmarknaden och utbildningssystemen i Sverige har genomgått betydande strukturella förändringar under de senaste decennierna, vilka har medfört att betydelsen av individuella studie- och yrkesval samt utvecklingen av karriärkompetens har ökat, i relation till såväl individens livsbanor som matchningen

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mellan utbud och efterfrågan på arbetsmarknaden. Inom det dominerande funktionalistiska och tekniskt rationella paradigmet betonas betydelsen av individuella val samt studie- och yrkesvägledning. Med införandet av marknadslogik i välfärdssektorn har den tidigare dominerande logiken, vilken var baserad på yrkesprofessionalism och professionellt ansvar, i många professionella grupper ersatts av organisationsprofessionalism och redovisningsskyldighet. I Sverige har studie- och yrkesvägledningens professionalisering i första hand drivits på från den politiska arenan. Professionalismen har utformats av expertis i policydokument, där den professionella kompetensen har definierats utifrån politiska mål. Den centrala styrningen och externa utvärderingen av studie- och yrkesvägledningen är dock begränsad. Studie- och yrkesvägledare har relativt stora frihet att formulera problem och identifiera lösningar i den professionella praktiken, men de har svagt stöd inom organisationen.

The aim of this article is to review and discuss professionalism and professionalisation of career guidance and counselling (CGC) in Sweden. In order to do so, we address two questions: 1) how career guidance and counselling can be described as a profession according to the defining features outlined in theories of the professions – including e.g. specific expertise, professional competence, and qualifications – and which actors are influential in the definition of career guidance counselling, and 2) how the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) has changed the conditions for the development of professionalism in career guidance counselling.

This is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, CGC is expected to address a wide range of complex societal issues, ranging from the matching of supply and demand in the labour market – on both the structural and the individual level – to reducing costs related to individuals making the wrong choices which may result in drop-outs, re-schooling to other vocations, or lock-in effects in the labour market (Nilsson, 2017). CGC is also expected to facilitate the integration of newly arrived immigrants and to address the school's compensatory mission, thus encouraging students to challenge socioeconomic and gender-based educational and vocational choices (Lovén, 2020; Lundahl et al., 2020; Official Report of the Swedish Government, 2019). Secondly, an increased focus on individual agency in educational and occupational choices has increased policy interest in CGC in Sweden. Thirdly, the NPM educational reforms of the early 1990s, which still are in place brought along new ways of governing CGC, and it has been claimed that the changes have impaired the conditions for the carrying out of CGC in Swedish schools (Lovén, 2020; Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009).

International and national top-down initiatives in Europe (e.g. Cedefop, 2009; Schiersmann et al., 2012) have stimulated the development of standards and guidelines, quality development of management systems, and different kinds of bottom-up initiatives at national levels. There are indications that these initiatives have led to increased national and local activities oriented towards professionalising CGC across Europe (Cedefop, 2021). In policy documents the focus is on formal training, competence frameworks, and the development of standards and guidelines as a foundation for professionalising CGC (Andreassen et al., 2019; Cedefop, 2021). However, professionalisation and professionalism are not often explicitly defined and there is a lack of theoretically informed discussion on the process of professionalisation of CGC in the policy documents.

There are significant international differences in the organisation, management, and evaluation of CGC as well as in the organisation and content of professional training programmes (Andreassen et al., 2019; Haug et al., 2020). This has implications for how the professionalisation process can be described and understood in different countries. Professionalism in CGC is, among other things, shaped by professional training programmes, quality assurance procedures, and demands on professional competence in the local context. The intention of this paper is to provide conceptual tools for describing and analysing professionalisation of and

## BACKGROUND

The Swedish educational system has undergone several major reforms since the 1990s. These reforms have resulted in a system where pupils make choices at an earlier age, thus limiting later educational choices and career paths. Compulsory and secondary schooling is decentralised and there are many different actors engaged in providing schooling in Sweden. While the municipalities hold the overall responsibility, there are also private actors that operate taxpayer-funded schools in a competitive market. This leaves little room to centrally plan for the number of pupils in different public secondary educational programmes (Lundahl et al., 2020). Students' educational choices are central to the quantitative planning of different educational programmes and for the distribution between and within higher education institutions (The Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015). The status of different occupations and the payback from investments in education in terms of wages and attractive working conditions do not necessarily correspond with societal priorities. Hence, there is a structural mismatch between supply and demand in several fields in Sweden, including education, healthcare, and technology (The Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2019).

Policymakers have increasingly placed the responsibility for making the “right” choices on individuals, both in relation to individual careers and when it comes to societal demands for competence and labour in different fields (Bengtsson, 2016). Demands on individual agency have increased at the same time as structural factors – related to, for example, gender, parents' educational backgrounds, social networks, influence from peers, economic capital, and cultural capital – are central in shaping the individual habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and perceived horizons of action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). These structural factors still hold a strong influence on educational and vocational choices and outcomes (Lundahl et al., 2020).

Thus, career guidance and counselling has become more important not only in relation to personal interests, development, and self-efficacy, but also when it comes to increasing individuals' knowledge about the educational system and the labour market as well as taking responsibility for the quantitative planning of post-secondary and tertiary education in Sweden. In both European and Swedish national policy documents and reports, the importance of career management competence and CGC has increasingly come into focus (Cedefop, 2009; Official Report of the Swedish Government, 2019; Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018). In light of this development, the professionalism and professionalisation of CGC has increased in importance and the conditions for the development of these matters have received increased attention. This paper responds to this development by reviewing the state of professionalism and professionalisation of CGC in Sweden.

In the following, before discussing the specifics of CGC in Sweden, we will first introduce the theoretical framework that forms a reference point for the review. This framework is presented in the first two sections of the paper. First, we present an overview of theories of the professions and the process of professionalisation and identify central defining features of professions (Abbott, 1988; Castro, 1992). Then, we outline how professionalism and professional competence can be described according to two different, contrasting types of logic of professionalism in welfare professions: professional *responsibility* and professional *accountability* (Dyrdal Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Englund & Dyrdal Solbrekke, 2015;). The descriptions of these opposing ideal typical forms of professionalism are used as a backdrop for the discussion of the organisation, governance, and evaluation of professional work. We then move on to review the professionalisation of CGC in Sweden, focusing on describing the mission of and the specific conditions for CGC work in Sweden. Finally, in the last two sections, the paper will discuss what constitutes professional competence and professionalism in CGC in relation to the different logics of professionalism, and how CGC in Sweden can be described as a profession in relation to the theories of the professions, drawing primarily on Abbott's (1988) theory of the professions with a focus on professional practice.

## **THE PROFESSIONS, PROFESSIONALISATION, AND PROFESSIONALISM**

### **ETHICAL CODES, SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY, AND PUBLIC TRUST**

With the coming and development of industrialisation, the demands on competence and qualifications in the labour force changed. The division of labour increased drastically as new occupational structures arose and numerous professions emerged (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933). Professions were initially connected to trust, autonomy, and professional responsibility. Durkheim (1958/1992) argued that professionals were central for stability and a necessary driving force for a prosperous development of society. In a normative vein, professionalisation was associated with something inherently good, rising above particular interests and focusing on the relation between the professional and the client (e.g. Parsons, 1963). Professions were to be guided by ethical codes with the aim of protecting the client (individual, group, or society) and providing the best possible service, irrespective of financial and social positions – that is, guided by concern and care for a patient, group, or society, and not by personal gain, financial profit, power, or social success.

According to Durkheim (1958/1992), the morality of a profession, if not rooted in an external authority, should be anchored in reason derived from science, research-based knowledge, and education. This should then be the foundation for professional socialisation and cohesion. Thus, the legitimacy of the professions and their control over a field of knowledge and practice relies on the moral dimension ensuring that the use of authority is for the public good. Professional authority is also based on long, shared formal schooling and on the training and development of strong professional identities and cultures. Control is operationalised by the professionals through ethical codes and monitored by professional associations. The professionals are regarded as a counterweight to the utilitarian demands of market logic, and the relationship to clients and to one's employers is based on trust (Durkheim, 1958/1992; Parsons, 1963).

### **JURISDICTIONS AND COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION**

Until the 1970s, research on the professions and professionalisation was dominated by structural functionalist perspectives. Thereafter, a more conflict-oriented perspective came to replace the harmonious consensus perspective dominant in earlier theories of the professions. Instead of motives derived from an altruistic betterment of society and democracy, the driving forces of professional groups were to be found in self-interest, exclusion, social closure, monopolisation of limited societal resources, and the creation of power positions in society. The principal role of professional associations was attributed to claims of monopoly rather than to ethical codes and relational control (e.g. Sarfatti Larson, 1977; Weber, 1968).

Consequently, professionalisation came primarily to be associated with a certain way of organising work and controlling expertise in a certain field of practice, in which professionals claimed the right of precedence in defining societal needs and determining acceptable and rational knowledge. Professionalisation is a process of delimitating a certain territory (connected to the heartland of the profession) in which the professionals have established the exclusive right to formulate central problems, find solutions, and adequately solve these problems (Abbott, 1988). According to Abbott (1988, 2005), professionalisation is operationalised in practice and constructed of three modalities, closely related to professional jurisdiction claims. The professionals classify a problem, reason about it, and take action. He refers to these modalities as diagnosis, inference, and treatment. A central concept in Abbott's (2005) analysis of professions is ecology. Ecology refers to a social structure or system consisting of actors, locations, and the relations between them. For example, in the ecology of the professions, the components are the professions (actors), a set of defined tasks (locations), and the relations associating the professions with the tasks. The character of the relation between actors and locations constitutes and delimits the agency of the former and the extension of the latter. Hence, the process of professionalisation needs to be studied in relation to local contexts and the specifics of the professional practice. In this article the focus is on the ecology of CGC. The edges of professional jurisdictions can be studied in the three arenas of workplace (the local arena), public, and state (Abbott, 1988, 2005).

While professionalisation concerns an external perspective, professionalism relates to an internal perspective (Sokkett, 1993). Sociological theories on professionalisation focus on the organisation and status of an occupation or professional collective (rather than on the individual) and on the *autonomy* of the professional practice as a foundation for authority (Freidson, 2001). Professionalism generally refers to aspects relating to the quality of the professional practice and professional responsibility as well as the moral dimension of a profession. Professionalism becomes apparent in practice but is associated with a subjective dimension when it comes to defining what quality is (Sokkett, 1993). Hence, professionalisation and professionalism become intertwined, as high-status professions also have a great deal of influence over defining quality.

In the functionalist perspective, professionals are oriented towards the collective rather than the self (Parsons, 1963), and in critical theories, the focus is on the professionals' self-interests (Sarfaty Larson, 1977). However, this shift of focus also reflects the changing role of the professions in society, the widening access to formalised knowledge (following from the rapid expansion of higher education), and the new ways of organising work (especially in the welfare professions with the introduction of NPM).

This outline of a theoretical framework can be summarised in line with some of the central characteristics of professionalisation: the development or prevalence of 1) scientific authority or expertise, 2) public trust, 3) autonomy, 4) jurisdiction, 5) collective organisation, and 6) an ethical code of conduct (Castro, 1992). Further on, we will make use of this synthesis (developed by Castro, 1992), focusing on the development of expertise and jurisdictions, in order to discuss the development of professionalism in career guidance and counselling in Sweden. The discussion is influenced by Abbott's (1988, 2005) theories, and our focus is set on how professionalisation and professionalism is enacted in professional practice. Professionalisation is understood in relation to the demands of professional practice, what the professionals do, and the context within which the work is conducted.

## DIFFERENT LOGICS OF PROFESSIONALISM AND PROFESSIONAL WORK – PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In Sweden, as in many other Western countries, there has been a shift from collectivistic policy approaches to individualistic ones since the 1990s. The idea of a strong welfare state and the government's involvement has been challenged, while ideas from the private sector concerning management ideals, market-based competition, and outcome-related measurements have been imported to the public service sector, replacing the earlier professional autonomy and quality-based focus in services (Svensson, 2006). The individualisation of responsibility and increased demands on individual agency also contribute to the deterioration of professional cohesion (Jensen & Lahn, 2005).

## THE RISE OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Professional autonomy and moral and civic engagement have increasingly been challenged and threatened by the implementation of market-oriented ideas and values in the organisation of the welfare professionals' work. Brint (1994) argues that this shift has had consequences for how the professionals see their own role in relation to clients and in society as a whole, and has described this as a transformation from social trustee professionalism into expert professionalism. Professional work has come to focus more on utilitarian considerations and cognitive and technical aspects. The professionals' opportunities to exercise their professional responsibility and to focus on the moral dimensions of their work have been delimited as a result of increased demands of efficiency, adding time constraints to client contacts, and new external quality evaluations of professional work. A central driving force in this development is the implementation of NPM, which is based on a logic of professional accountability rather than a logic of professional responsibility. The control over the professionals' work has been transferred to bureaucrats and politicians (Englund & Dyrda Solbrekke, 2015).

The objective of NPM is to create greater efficiency in producing and delivering public sector services. The focus of NPM has changed over time; initially, the focus was on structural



transformation through the privatisation of the welfare sector (i.e. schools, healthcare institutions) and the reorganisation of the same sector through the creation of internal markets, increased division of labour, standardisation, and time measurement. But the focus has shifted towards leading by setting goals, targeting, and evaluating outcomes through regulation, transparency, documentation, and recurrent inspections. There has been an increase of administrative work and complex bureaucratic structures related to follow-up and evaluation, and professionals spend less of their time doing what has traditionally been regarded as the core tasks of the profession, i.e. meeting the clients (e.g. Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015; Evetts, 2009).

## FROM RESPONSIBILITY TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Dyrdaahl Solbrekke and Englund (2011) have described two opposing types of logic of professional work in teaching in Sweden which they call professional responsibility and professional accountability. Arguably, accountability and transparency are important for critical evaluations of professional work. But the increased demands for documentation and quality criteria for professional work in schools, following in the wake of NPM, build on externally developed models of quality evaluation, generally focusing on measurable and quantifiable variables and ignoring other qualitative aspects which cannot be measured as easily (Dyrdaahl Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). There is a risk that accountability is based on arbitrary criteria, leading to an increased workload that benefits neither the professionals nor the clients or the public good (Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015).

The logic of professional responsibility in a professionalism framework is based on trusting that the professionals are capable of exercising their professional judgement, analysing problems, handling dilemmas, deliberating individually or with colleagues, and taking action (Abbott, 1988). The professionals are expected to justify their decisions and actions based on scientifically based knowledge, proven experience, and moral considerations. The line of action cannot always be predetermined on the basis of standardised procedures, and the consequences cannot always be measured in terms of fixed external indicators or criteria. Thus, the logic of professional responsibility is proactive and characterised by reflexivity, a moral rationality, internal evaluations, negotiated standards, implicit language, quality evaluations shaped by the profession, relative autonomy, situated judgements, and personal responsibility (Dyrdaahl Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015).

The logic of professional accountability, on the other hand, is reactive and characterised by standardisation, control, economic and juridical rationality, external evaluations, predetermined indicators, transparent language, political goals, and following decisions made by superiors. Accountability is based on external control of the professionals' work, building on beforehand-established and measurable criteria of quality related to juridical and economical terminology (Dyrdaahl Solbrekke & Englund, 2011; Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015).

These descriptions of different and opposing types of logic could be regarded as ideal types useful for analysing and understanding the complex interplay between the market-oriented management logic (or professional accountability) and the professional management logic (or professional responsibility) in the organisation, management, and evaluation of professional work in different contexts. As these are ideal types, most actual cases will tend to fall somewhere in between them. In Sweden, the teaching profession is mainly characterised by professional accountability (Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015). The work of teachers is strictly regulated in the Education Act, externally evaluated by predetermined indicators in relation to political goals, and subject to extensive documentation and transparency. However, CGC is only briefly mentioned in the Education Act and regulations in national and local steering documents are vague and provide limited direction in how the overall goals are to be implemented and evaluated (Lovén, 2020). While there is extensive literature on the professionalisation and professionalism of teachers in Sweden (e.g. Englund & Dyrdaahl Solbrekke, 2015; Nilsson-Lindström & Beach, 2013; Persson, 2008), professionalisation and professionalism in CGC, especially in Sweden, has sparsely been researched (e.g. Weber et al., 2018).

In this section we review the ecology, mission, and specific conditions of CGC work in Sweden. Approximately 4,900 individuals are employed as career guidance counsellors in Sweden and 80 percent of them are women (Statistics Sweden, 2020). A follow-up of their establishment in the labour market showed that more than 90 percent of the career guidance counsellor graduates were firmly established in the labour market 1–1.5 years after graduation. Of those who were established, 70 percent were employed as career guidance counsellors, 10 percent were established as employment officers, and the remaining were mainly employed as administrators in public services or as specialists in education (The Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2019). According to the Parliamentary Committee on Education (2018), there is a shortage of qualified or certified career counsellors and approximately 30 percent of those working as guidance counsellors in primary schools and 20 percent of those working in secondary schools lack the formal education requirements. The relatively high proportion of career guidance counsellors without a degree and a common professional competence and socialisation is a contributing factor to the differences in organisation, content, and quality in CGC services in Sweden (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). Previous research on professionalism and professionalisation of CGC in the UK indicates that Sweden shares this challenge with other countries as this research reveals a lack of both professional cohesion and a clearly defined professional identity (Johnson & Neary, 2015).

CGC entails providing pupils and students with the competence required to make well-informed choices related to their career, both in the educational system and in the labour market. CGC can be narrow (individual) and broad (general). In an international context, the former is often referred to as career counselling and the latter as career learning (Lundahl et al., 2020). Career learning refers to activities that are to be incorporated broadly into the school organisation, for example through collaboration with teachers aiming at developing the pupils' knowledge about working life and conditions on the labour market (Lovén, 2020).

In individual counselling, the individual is in focus and is encouraged to reflect on themselves in relation to different possible career opportunities. This form of counselling draws upon knowledge that the pupils have acquired through general counselling (Lovén, 2020). For the individual, CGC is associated with increased opportunities for self-exploration, exploration of interests and opportunities, and increased knowledge of different possible educational and occupational paths regardless of perceived limitations related to gender and cultural or socioeconomic background (Official Report of the Swedish Government, 2019; Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018).

According to the Education Act, all schools should try to compensate for socioeconomic imbalances, ensuring that all pupils have the same opportunities to achieve the learning outcome. National curricula and other central regulations are focused on social equality, but the responsibility for CGC decisions have been decentralised to the local level (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). Still, the system of school choice has, since it was introduced in the Swedish school system, increased the social imbalances in recruitment to different schools and educational programmes in secondary and post-secondary education (Holmlund et al., 2014). In light of this, several government reports have highlighted the importance of strengthening pupils' career learning and competence in making informed choices, and thus also the role of CGC in schools in Sweden (Official Report of the Swedish Government, 2019; Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018).

Several reports and evaluations in the last decades have identified challenges when it comes to how career guidance is implemented in schools in Sweden (e.g. the Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018; The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2013). Unlike in other European countries, in Sweden there are no national qualification frameworks or standards for career guidance and counselling. National and local steering documents generally provide little guidance in how career guidance policies are to be operationalised and implemented in professional practice. Present regulations of career counselling in schools in Sweden are formulated in broad and general terms, providing little specific direction for municipalities, private school owners, school administrations, and principals on how to implement career guidance. There are few routines, little systematic planning, the goals are seldom followed up, and systematic quality assurance

is rarely conducted (Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018; The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2013). Career guidance and counselling could partly be regarded as a residual arena (cf. Abbott, 2005). Government reports, e.g. from the Parliamentary Committee on Education (2018), and evaluations of the implementation of CGC in schools conducted by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2013) have identified this as a problem of weak governing and management, as the governing of CGC does not conform to the market-oriented management logic and ideas of organisational professionalism. However, it can also be interpreted as the implementation of a professional management logic and professional responsibility in practice. The lack of central steering, decision-making, and external control leaves room for professional autonomy in defining problems and creating and implementing solutions. It can be interpreted as an expression of professional discretion and an assumption, from the government, that the professionals are the experts best suited when it comes to determining how the professional work should be conducted, and that control over the work is internal and based on the ethical codes of the profession.

Previous reports have shown that municipalities and private school owners, who have the overall responsibility for developing and implementing strategies for career guidance counselling in schools, often lack overall goals and plans, and that the principals do not know that plans need to be in place. The task is delegated to the career guidance counsellors, and CGC can be fragmented both between and within municipalities (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009; Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018; The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2013). Counselling activities are often concentrated around the later years in primary and secondary education and are mainly associated with the choice of secondary school programmes and higher education programmes. Less time is spent on broader career learning issues (Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018). Moreover, the career guidance counsellors often work part-time in the school and have limited organisational support. They experience that they are expected to take on assignments and administrative tasks connected neither to the core or heartland of the profession nor to their idea of what CGC should be, such as student health and social issues, workplace training placements, and marketing of the schools (Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018). Furthermore, the expectations and demands of professional practice are connected to the specific workplace and differ greatly between different municipalities and schools (Lundahl et al., 2020).

In the professional ethical guidelines of career guidance counselling formulated by the Swedish Association of Guidance Counsellors, the focus is on the individual clients' interests and needs and the professional practice is centred around dialogues with the clients (The Swedish Association of Guidance Counsellors, 2020). Still, career guidance counsellors must often handle expectations from policymakers to work with matching the supply of competence with the demands of the labour market, at the same time as they are expected to consider and support individual preferences and interests that are not always aligned with perceived societal needs (Lundahl & Nilsson, 2009). Thus, the relationship between structural factors and individual agency is central to the practice of CGC: it entails balancing the preferences and needs of the individual clients with societal expectations.

Summing up, we notice that the efforts of CGC in Sweden seem to be characterised by a certain degree of autonomy in defining problems and creating and implementing solutions. In addition, the jurisdiction of the profession is relatively weak insofar as the CGC professionals often are expected or required to take assignments and tasks external to the profession, and there is an explicit code of ethics which, however, is advisory rather than imperative.

## **PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE AND PROFESSIONALISM IN CAREER GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN SWEDEN**

During the first decades of the 21st century, we could witness an expansion of career guidance activities in the EU area. It was a principal aim of the Council of the European Union to increase the provision of CGC services and establish a coherent and holistic guidance system accessible throughout the lifespan. The development of guidance services was steered according to a soft governance model of best practices (Bengtsson, 2016), and a tendency towards standardisation and coherence could be discerned.



The educational programmes in CGC are structured in different ways in different countries (Andreassen et al., 2019). The field of research in CGC is also diverse. Internationally, there are some studies on professionalism in CGC (e.g. Neary & Hutchinson, 2009; O'Reilly et al., 2020), but there is an overall lack of empirical studies on the professionalisation of CGC and on the everyday practice of career guidance counsellors focusing on what the counsellors actually do, what they need to know and learn, how they form their professional identity, how they perceive their job and profession (Weber et al., 2018). This holds true in particular for Sweden. Professional competence and professionalism in CGC have mainly been defined in policy documents and government reports that have been influential for curriculum design in higher education, defining both the educational and professional competence bases of the profession in Europe.

The international competence framework presented by the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2003), the professional roles and core competence developed by the Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE) (Schiersmann et al., 2012), and the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (Hooley, 2014) have influenced the formation of curricula and the educational competence base of CGC in Europe.

The NICE Core Competence Framework is derived from political objectives of the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy for the development of higher education in Europe, and EU policies on career guidance and practices. One of the aims of the NICE Core Competence Framework is to provide a guide for setting up higher education degree programmes and establishing CGC as an independent academic discipline. The competence framework consists of a set of common points of reference for educational programmes in career guidance and counselling, divided into professional roles (providing the foundation of the model), core competence (i.e. competence required in professional practice), and a curricular model suggesting relevant learning outcomes for CGC programmes. In the model, professionalism refers to the integration of ethical aspects, lifelong learning, knowledge, and competence into an understanding of career guidance and counselling as a profession. Professionalism entails reflection on the professional role, in line with Donald Schön's reflective practitioner (Schiersmann et al., 2012).

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has also developed a competence framework for career guidance counselling in the EU based on a definition of competence as entailing propositional knowledge (knowing *that*), practical knowledge (knowing *how*) and procedural knowledge (knowing *how to be*) with a focus on ethical and reflective practices. The purpose of the framework was to create a foundation for, among other things, the planning and further developing of national training and qualification systems, mapping staff roles, and defining job specifications (Cedefop, 2009). However, the reports from the NICE network and Cedefop do not explicitly theoretically engage with the process of professionalisation.

The curricula in the degree programmes in CGC in Sweden are based on the Swedish Higher Education Act from 1993, and the degree ordinance is structured according to the three areas of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities, and assessment ability and attitudes. The different dimensions of the competence frameworks developed by NICE and Cedefop are to varying extents reflected in the Swedish education ordinance and the curriculum of the degree programmes in Sweden. Overall, the competence prescribed in the ordinance is narrower than the competence frameworks outlined by NICE and Cedefop. This has had implications for the development of educational curricula in the degree programmes in CGC. The educational programmes are oriented towards individual career counselling in schools. The higher education programmes in Sweden have focused on professional competence related to the micro-level and less attention has been given to the meso-level and interventions on the organisational level, i.e. developing students' competence in e.g. organisational issues, management, leadership, contracting, and marketing (Andreassen et al., 2019).

In Sweden, the National Agency for Education has published reports intended to, among other things, provide guidance in how professionals in schools should interpret the aims of CGC according to the Swedish Education Act and support the implementation of CGC in Swedish schools.

It can reasonably be said that one of the most commonly used policy documents in Swedish CGC is “Working with educational and vocational guidance – general advice and comments from The Swedish National Agency for Education” [in Swedish: *Arbete med studie- och yrkesvägledning. Skolverkets allmänna råd med kommentarer*] (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Being a part of the workings of Swedish governmental agencies, “general advice” (in Swedish: *allmänna råd*) offers guidelines for the interpretation of ordinances. While the ordinances are binding from a legal point of view, documents providing general advice are not – they are only recommendations. In this particular case, they provide guidelines for organisers, principals, and counsellors regarding the organisation, execution, and development of CGC.

As mentioned above, the highly decentralised Swedish educational policy implemented in the 1990s contained few guidelines and directives for CGC, except for a few general objectives intended to be interpreted and carried out at the municipal and local level. The relative absence of guidelines left some space for professional autonomy over defining problems as well as creating and implementing solutions. In this void, however, a need for support seemed to emerge. The general advice document has become important for many career guidance counsellors in the accomplishment of their tasks (Lundahl et al., 2020).

Since the general advice not only outlines the scope and the doings of the CGC profession, but also its qualification requirements, it points out which competence the profession requires. To cater for the students’ demand of CGC, the following competence is required: “[D]eep and up-to-date knowledge of educational routes and systems, labour markets, work life and vocations. Theoretical knowledge in career choice counselling is also required, as is knowledge and skills in conversation methodology and methods for choosing and teaching” (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013, p. 21; translated by the authors).

Apart from this, it is also held that the CGC personnel should develop a professional attitude based on “current research and evaluations” in and for the planning and execution of CGC activities, and that the development of their professional competence should be based on evaluations of CGC practice. Moreover, the description of competence found in the general advice also states that career guidance counsellors need to know how to develop connections with working life. Continuous competence development is held to be of particular importance in regard to admission and interim regulations as well as entry requirements, but also when it comes to changes in work life and educational systems in general. It is also stated that the counsellor should also be available for the professional development of teachers in matters relating to educational systems and labour markets (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Lastly, it is pointed out that CGC competence includes the ability to widen the students’ perspectives so that they can transcend the circumscriptions of educational and vocational aspirations that are motivated by social identities such as gender, social class, and ethnicity.

These are the basic tenets of the description of CGC competence in the general advice document. The ones quoted above constitute the core competence. Beyond this, certain differentiations are laid out, for example those related to the different pedagogical needs of students in secondary and upper secondary school, respectively. Moreover, the special requirements for CGC personnel in schools offering special educational support are also highlighted. Some competence is also described and elaborated on more than just once, above all those required for teaching the management of educational and vocational choosing [in Swedish: *valkompetens*].

In relation to the core competence of CGC put forth by Cedefop (2009) and NICE (Schiersmann et al., 2012), some peculiarities are discernible. According to NICE, there are five discrete roles for CGC professionals which correspond to five relatively discrete sets of competence:

- [1] The Career Educator supports people in developing their own career management competence.
- [2] The Career Information & Assessment Expert supports people in assessing their personal characteristics and needs, then connecting them with the labour market and education systems.
- [3] The Career Counsellor supports individuals in understanding their situations, so as to work through issues towards solutions.
- [4] The Programme & Service Manager ensures the quality and delivery of CGC

organisations' services. [5] The Social Systems Intervener & Developer supports clients (even) in crisis and works to change systems for the better. (Schiersmann et al., 2012, p. 44)

The depiction of CGC competence laid out in Cedefop's (2009) *Professionalising career guidance* exhibits many similarities with NICE's enumeration (Schiersmann et al., 2012). Here, we find a thematic division in foundation competence, client-interaction competence, and supporting competence. The first term denotes abilities, skills, and knowledge that should pervade all CGC professional activities, and as such, they are quite general in character (and hence suitable in the practices of similar professions). For example, the ability to recognise and respond to clients' diverse needs are pinpointed, as are the abilities to integrate theory and research into practice and to develop one's own capabilities and understand any limitations (Cedefop, 2009).

On the other hand, the second cluster, thematically defined as client-interaction competence contains competence central to the CGC profession – the ability to undertake career development activities, enable access to information, conduct and enable assessment, develop and deliver career learning programmes, make referrals, provide advocacy, and facilitate entry into learning and work. This also holds true for the third cluster – supporting competence in the form of systems and network competence. Here, we find central CGC competence such as the ability to design strategies for career development or managing opportunity information services, but also more generic competence such as operating within networks and building partnerships, managing one's own caseloads and maintaining user records, and engaging in research and evaluation.

The description of CGC competence found in the general advice from the Swedish National Education Agency displays a narrower focus than the accounts of Cedefop and NICE. With a limited number of exceptions, the focus lies almost exclusively on the first three CGC roles that NICE points out (career educator, career information and assessment expert, and career counsellor; NICE, 2012), and to the client-interaction competence defined by Cedefop (2009). Programme and service management issues are assigned to organisers and principals, and matters related to social system intervention and development are clearly left out. Generic "foundation" competence is not listed, and competence related to client support is sparsely mentioned. As pointed out above, this is in all probability related to the fact that the general advice primarily aims to provide guidelines for the interpretation of ordinances for governmental agencies. Its discourse unfolds from a legalistic starting point, not a pedagogic one.

In a report from the Swedish Parliamentary Committee on Education (2018), it is indicated that there may be discrepancies between core competence and professional roles, as defined by e.g. NICE and Cedefop, and the demands of the career guidance counsellors' actual work tasks. Thus, there might be a gap between the ideal role – as described by NICE and Cedefop – and CGC practice in Sweden, but whether this is the case remains a largely unexplored empirical question.

There are a range of different competence frameworks that constitute professional approaches to the establishment of what career guidance counsellors should know and do. The frameworks potentially constitute a foundation for empowering the profession and developing professionalism by pointing to professional competence that is relevant for the professionalisation of CGC. However, the best-practice competence frameworks do not necessarily take into consideration the specific local ecologies in which the counsellors work. There is a lack of theoretically informed studies on the conditions and qualification demands that characterise the career guidance counsellors' professional practice in Sweden.

Professionalism is also associated with different perspectives on quality. The measurements of quality in CGC in Swedish schools mainly adhere to a market-oriented management logic and are characterised by professional accountability rather than professional responsibility (Englund & Dyrddal Solbrenke, 2015). Quality in CGC is defined, controlled, and evaluated by policymakers, the organisation, or clients, and not shaped by the profession. The official administration tradition in Sweden differs from many other countries, including other Nordic countries (Lovén, 2020). In Sweden, quality assurance in CGC is conducted by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, but since the regulations of career counselling in schools in Sweden are formulated in broad and general terms, they provide little specific direction for external evaluations (in line with the logic of accountability).

In this section, CGC in Sweden will be discussed in relation to the central features of professionalisation and professionalism identified above. Career guidance and counselling is not one of the classic professions, but the review identifies an ongoing professionalisation process of career counselling in Sweden leading towards an emerging semi- or quasi-profession (Abbott, 1988).

There is a close connection between professionalisation processes and higher education: in Sweden, it is through higher education that the professionals are socialised into the professional collective and acquire a professional competence base. Professionalisation is associated with control of some form of theoretical esoteric knowledge and is something that separates the professions from other occupations (that are anchored in practical skills), for example the engineer compared to the mechanic (Abbott, 1988) or the career guidance counsellor compared to the career coach in a Swedish context. The professional competence base should neither be too specific or narrow, nor too general or vague (Wilensky, 1964). Professional competence should not be easily routinised or standardised, or easily mastered by anyone with little association to the field of practice. It is central that professional competence can only be acquired through specialised education and training so that not everyone can claim to be an expert. In Sweden there are professional bachelor degree programmes in CGC that provide an educational competence base derived from research and proven practice as a foundation for scientific authority and expertise. However, research on CGC is still relatively nascent and limited, and has not been centred around a clearly delineated academic discipline (Neary & Hutchinson, 2009).

Almost a third of those working as guidance counsellors in compulsory schools and a fifth of those working in secondary schools in Sweden lack a degree from a professional CGC programme (Parliamentary Committee on Education, 2018). However, formal credentials from higher education are a legal requirement for becoming employed as a career counsellor in compulsory education institutions for a duration longer than two years, thus establishing a professional jurisdiction. The cohesion of the professional collective is associated with the socialisation that takes place in the educational programme and through formal and informal collective professional associations and professional journals both nationally and internationally, for example The Swedish Association of Guidance Counsellors, IAEVG, NoRNet, and social media networks. Among other things, the professional associations provide an arena for networking and organising conferences and have developed an ethical code of conduct focusing on the public good, which the members are expected to adhere to. Thus, the vocation of CGC in Sweden is adopting many of the strategies and demands that research on the professions has pointed out as central to professionalisation.

Professional associations have often been a driving force for professionalisation processes. Traditionally, legal jurisdictions of professions have been instated after the profession has established legitimacy based on the public's trust and on trust within the organisations in which they operated (Abbott, 1998). In Swedish CGC, however, the professionalisation process seems to have been partly driven by policymakers – for example, by the official requirement for a degree from a higher education programme in CGC for permanent employment as a career guidance and counsellor in Swedish schools – and partly by avatars or representatives of the profession, such as professional experts working on official government reports.

Policy documents and several government reports have emphasised the importance of developing and strengthening the field of CGC as well as the need to upgrade the professionalism and status of the occupational group engaged in the field. The need for CGC has increased with the shift of focus from collective solutions to individual agency and choice. Through increased demands on individual agency, for example in the quantitative planning of education at the upper secondary (Lundahl et al., 2020) and tertiary level (The Swedish Higher Education Authority, 2015), the state has established a need for a professional group on which to place the responsibility for matching supply and demand in the labour market. Policymakers have placed increased responsibility on individuals for making the “right” educational choices in relation to both individual careers and societal demands for competence in different fields (Bengtsson, 2016).

As noted above, the implementation of NPM in Swedish schools has led to a delimitation of occupational professionalism among teachers, as professional responsibility has been replaced by accountability (Englund & Dyrdal Solbrette, 2015). Since career guidance counsellors' main field of practice in Sweden is in schools, the implementation has also affected the CGC profession – but not to the same extent as teachers, as described by Englund and Dyrdal Solbrette (2015). This holds true especially for the decentralising developments inherent in NPM. The review of research and reports indicates that CGC is not clearly defined and integrated into the organisational structure in many municipalities. The lack of regulation in targeting, standardisation, predetermined quality criteria, and external control of professional practice could be an indication that career guidance counsellors still have some professional autonomy and opportunities for shaping the emerging profession of career guidance and counselling. The review shows that there are generally few formally binding guidelines, little standardisation, and relatively limited demands for documentation and external evaluation of the work activities as compared to other professional groups in educational institutions. Thus, the practice of career guidance counsellors does not easily fall into one of the ideal types outlined above (i.e. professional responsibility or accountability).

The results from the report by the Parliamentary Committee on Education (2018) indicate that the professionals potentially have influence over the formulation of assignments and delimitation of their work, and that they are trusted to have the professional competence to be best suited to operationalise goals in professional practice. However, as the guidance counsellors generally work independently, often being the only representative of the profession in the school, and have limited organisational support, it could be challenging to define and drive the development of the professional work and policymaking in the desired direction (Lovén, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Professionalisation should not be understood as an end goal, but rather a continuous process. When reviewing CGC in Sweden in relation to the central characteristics of professionalisation (scientific authority or expertise, public trust, autonomy, jurisdiction, collective organisation, and an ethical code of conduct) identified by Castro (1992), CGC in Sweden could be described as an emerging semi-profession meeting the different characteristics to various extents. The occurrence of professional discretion or autonomy is rather widespread, the scientific authority is safeguarded by educational programmes at university level (although it has no academic discipline “of its own”, unlike, for example, social work), there is an ethical code of conduct (albeit only advisory), and the jurisdiction is existing but sometimes challenged.

The professionalisation of CGC in Sweden is to a large degree driven by policymakers. Rather than being defined by practising professionals, professionalism is externally defined in reports and policy documents shaped by elites and experts, outlining core competence in CGC related to political objectives. Moreover, the definition of the professional core competence of CGC is narrower in some Swedish key documents, and it has been held that there may be discrepancies between the core competence and professional roles (as defined by NICE and Cedefop) and the demands of the career guidance counsellors' actual work tasks. Thus, there is a need for further research to explore the relationship between professional education, learning, and work in CGC in Sweden.

The analysis of professionalisation of CGC in Sweden provides knowledge that is relevant for strengthening the profession, and for defining and further developing its professionalism. This becomes evident when we highlight the relation between New Public Management and the development of CGC professionalism. The development of CGC professionalism in Sweden is also clearly conditioned by the fact that CGC primarily operates in an arena characterised by NPM. Professionalism in CGC in Sweden is guided by policy documents and in many ways shaped by the implementation of NPM in schools. The relative lack of steering in a domain characterised by accountability and fairly advanced decentralisation allows for some degree of autonomy and freedom for the CGC professionals in Sweden to define and shape their own professionalism.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.



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