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Title Page

Erik Hagaseth Haug & Peter Plant

Research-based knowledge – Researchers' contribution to evidence-based practice and policy making in career guidance

Erik Hagaseth Haug

Lillehammer University College

2604 Lillehammer

Peter Plant

Aarhus University

8000 Aarhus C

Email & telephone of the corresponding author: erik.haug@hil.no ,
004791708016

Research-Based Knowledge : Researchers' Contribution to Evidence-Based Practice and Policy Making in Career Guidance

Abstract

To present evidence for the outcomes of career guidance is increasingly seen as pivotal for a further professionalization of policy making and service provision. This paper puts an emphasis on researchers' contribution to evidence-based practice and policy making in career guidance. We argue for a broader and more pluralistic research strategy to meet the complexity of possible questions needed to be asked to provide evidence in career guidance. The article puts a specific focus on the need for a stronger involvement of the voice of users.

Keywords: childhood career development, social-emotional development, evidence-based practice, policy making

Résumé. Connaissance basée sur la recherche - La contribution de chercheurs aux pratiques fondées sur l'expérience et à l'élaboration de directives politiques pour le conseil en orientation.

Présenter la preuve des résultats du conseil en orientation est de plus en plus perçu comme un pivot pour la poursuite de la professionnalisation de l'élaboration des politiques et de l'offre de prestations. Cet article met l'accent sur la contribution des chercheurs à une pratique fondée sur l'expérience, et à l'élaboration de directives politiques en orientation. Nous défendons une stratégie de recherche qui soit plus vaste et davantage pluraliste, dans le but de répondre à la complexité des questions possibles devant être adressées, afin de justifier le conseil en orientation. Les auteurs portent plus spécifiquement leur attention sur la nécessité d'une plus grande prise en considération de l'avis des utilisateurs et utilisatrices.

Zusammenfassung. Forschungsbasiertes Wissen – Beitrag von Wissenschaftlern zur evidenzbasierten Praxis und Richtliniengestaltung in der Laufbahnberatung

Die Präsentation von Nachweisen der Wirkung von Laufbahnberatung wird als entscheidend für die weitere Professionalisierung der Richtlinieneinführung und Dienstleistungsorientierung angesehen. Dieser Artikel betont den Beitrag der Forscher zu evidenzbasierter Praxis und Richtlinieneinführung in der Laufbahnberatung. Wir sprechen uns für eine erweitere und pluralistische Forschungsstrategie aus, um die Komplexität der möglichen Fragen zu berücksichtigen, die als Nachweis für den Nutzen von Laufbahnberatung gestellt werden müssen. Die Autoren legen einen besonderen Fokus auf die Notwendigkeit einer stärkeren Einbindung des Mitspracherechts und der Meinung der Klienten.

Resumen. Investigación basada en el conocimiento - La contribución de los investigadores a las prácticas y políticas sobre orientación profesional basadas en la evidencia.

La presentación de la evidencia de los resultados de la orientación profesional se percibe cada vez más como un hecho fundamental que contribuye a una mayor profesionalización de la elaboración de políticas y prestación de servicios. Este artículo pone el énfasis en la contribución de los investigadores a las prácticas y las políticas de orientación laboral, basadas en la evidencia. Abogamos por una estrategia más amplia y plural de investigación para satisfacer la complejidad de las posibles preguntas que se han de preguntar para aportar rigor en la orientación profesional. Los autores ponen especial énfasis en la necesidad de una mayor participación de los usuarios.

Research-Based Knowledge: Researchers' Contribution to Evidence-Based Practice
and Policy Making in Career Guidance

Lifelong guidance has received increasing attention at international, European, and national levels during the last ten years (Plant, 2012). In Europe, two resolutions of the Education Council have highlighted the need for strong guidance services (European Union, EU, 2004, 2008). Some of the focal points of the resolutions were quality assurance and the evidence base for policy and systems development. Furthermore, a series of symposia on career guidance and public policy have highlighted the need to develop effective systems for gathering data on the impact of career development/career guidance services in a number of respects, such as individual well-being, social inclusion, and economic development (Watts, Bezanson, & McCarthy, 2014). The E.U. resolutions and the symposia have increased the interest for research aimed at providing solid evidence for policy decision making and professionalization of practice in relation to career guidance (Hiebert, Schober, & Oakes, 2014). The basic approach is that policy decisions should be based on solid and scientific evidence.

Conversely, in some cases, evidence is produced to underpin and legitimize already established policies. This can be seen in some Danish cases, where private companies have been commissioned to research the time used on what was already defined as “overlapping” guidance interventions, for instance (Boston Consulting Group, 2013). In the Danish cases, a number of such “overlaps,” i.e., lines of coordination and collaboration, were found and identified as a waste of time and resources. These important cooperative resources were, in turn, then defined as superfluous expenditures that could be spent on targeting guidance even more than previously was the case. With this maneuver, two policy aims were achieved: (1) guidance services were disciplined to narrow the targeting of guidance activities, and (2) resources were channeled to sustain this policy, with no extra costs. Thus, existing policies

were legitimized through evidence that was produced with this particular purpose in mind (Rambøll, 2008). This approach has been carried forward consistently over the last few years, ignoring other types of research as part of the policy making process (Boston Consulting Group, 2013).

What is career guidance?

As mentioned above, the European Council of Ministers of Education, first in 2004, and then again in 2008, have adopted E.U. council resolutions on lifelong guidance with a view to better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies. In the most recent resolution (EU, 2008), EU member states were encouraged to give special attention to active citizenship, quality assurance, cooperation, and policy development on an informed evidence base. The definition of career guidance adopted for a vast number of OECD/EU/World Bank reviews a decade ago encompasses a number of activities, often conducted in formal settings, such as schools or public employment services (PES) (OECD, 2004). In short, guidance is much more than a face-to-face interview. It includes informing, advising, assessing, teaching, enabling, advocating, networking, feeding back, managing, innovating/ changing systems, signposting, mentoring, sampling work experience, and following up (Ford, 2001).

The definition points to the many roles and functions of career guidance, many of which go far beyond direct client work, and well into feedback and system change, and, thus policy-making on the ground. In this respect, collaboration, network-building, and partnerships are essential, as no single guidance practitioner can fill all of these roles. Beyond these definitions and activities, policies and policy-making provides the framework for all types of career guidance. It is to these aspects that we now turn, with a particular view to the current focus on evidence-based practice and policies.

Critical Realism as a Meta-Theory

We find it preferable to build our analysis on the scientific concepts of critical realism, the meta-theory that states that the relation between the reality and the concept we use to describe this reality should be the focal point of research and theoretical development (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2003). Reality is described as intransitive objects, i.e. social constructed realities, and the aim for science is to describe these realities as precisely as possible, but not as a final answer to what reality is. The other concept of importance in critical realism is the transitive object. This is our knowledge, concepts, and understanding of the reality that is being analyzed.

In our context, the development, organization, and interventions of career guidance will be the intransitive object. The collection, assessment, and use of an evidence base in guidance can be seen as the transitive object in this context. The main argument in critical realism is that there are underlying patterns in the relation between the intransitive and the transitive object. In this article, we highlight the fact that there are many possible definitions of reality (intransitive object) and, because of that, many possible answers (transitive objects). Grounded in critical realism, we raise several points we find important, including: (1) that a basic discussion is needed on the role of particular types of evidence in shaping guidance policies and practices; (2) and the role of guidance practitioners, researchers, and users of services in contributing to shape guidance policies and practices is important. We argue for the need for a more pluralistic and holistic approach, leaving room for the multitude of answers or patterns of understanding regarding the process of gathering, assessing and using evidence-based knowledge in career guidance policy and practice.

Evidence-Based Policy Making and Practice

The case for evidence-based policy making and practice seems obvious. “After all, who would argue that practice should not be based on evidence?” (Shahar, 1997, p. 110). In

the educational field of research, Hammersley (2001) warned against this kind of obviousness in relation to the concept of evidence-based practice. He stated: “There is an initial, and generic, problem with the notion of evidence-based practice which needs to be dealt with. This is that its name is a slogan whose rhetorical effect is to discredit opposition” and, further, that “...there is an implication built into the phrase evidence-based practice that opposition to it can only be irrational” (Hammersley, 2001, p. 1). Likewise, based on a review of articles on evidence-based career guidance, we find it important to question this kind of obviousness in the field of evidence-based career guidance (e.g., Hooley, 2014; Hughes, 2004; Maguire, & Killeen, 2003; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 2004; Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Lipsey, Steinka-Fry, & Morrison, 2011).

We find that there is a need to clarify the underlying meaning of the concept of “evidence based,” which seems to include a number of different patterns of understanding in connection to evidence-based career guidance. This applies to the need for evidence (Who needs it? For what?); who owns, controls, and pays for the production of evidence; the kind of evidence is needed, desirable, or even available; how evidence is produced; and how evidence functions in relation to career guidance practitioners and policy-makers. Hiebert et al. (2014) argued that the main driver of understandings for the increased interest in evidence must be seen in connection with governments’ need to seek assurances that public money spent on public services was being well used. For example, Herr (2003) suggested the development of cost-benefit analyses to document the results of career services, and he tabled the idea of creating national research databases to collect and distribute such information. Further, Watts (2003) urged efficacy researchers to link career practices to economic efficiency, social equity, and sustainability. Hiebert (1994) called for increased and more precise efficacy assessment in career counselling in Canada.

From evidence-based medicine to evidence-based practice. Evidence has been produced for centuries. In career guidance, for example, the first wave of psychometric testing was based on the very idea of measurable traits and skills (Plant, 2009). The origin of much current evidence-based practice (and policy-making) dates back to the concept of evidence-based medicine, which was introduced as a training program for doctors at a university in Canada in 1991 (Vandvik, 2009). It was introduced as a new method to support doctors in including scientific knowledge to a larger extent in their clinical practice. An influential definition of evidence based medicine is “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of the individual patient. It means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research” (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996, p. 71). Later writings emphasized the patients’ values as an important source of knowledge. Patient values are defined as “the unique preferences, concerns, and expectations each patient brings to a clinical encounter” (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000, p. 1). This particular medicine-oriented mindset has had a strong influence on subsequent evidence-based approaches in other non-related fields, where it might be less appropriate.

Delivery of Research-Based Knowledge to Inform Decision Making in Policy and Practice

In evidence-based practice and policymaking, research-based knowledge is seen as an external input of relevant research. The “external clinical evidence both invalidates previously accepted diagnostic tests and treatments and replaces them with new ones that are more powerful, more accurate, more efficacious, and safer” (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71). It points to a need of both validating what is known so far, but also being innovative in developing new solid and reliable research approaches. The discussion below of research-based knowledge is grounded in Goodman’s (2003) distinction between three dimensions of evidence-based

practice and policy in a profession. The first dimension is the availability of research-based evidence. The second dimension is whether the available evidence is collected, assessed, and systemized in a reliable manner. The third dimension is directed at questioning the actual use in political or/and practice decision making.

Availability of evidence. An illustration of the first dimension can be found in European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network's (ELGPN) "The Evidence Base on Lifelong Guidance: A Guide to Key Finding for effective Policy and Practice," which brought an important contribution to a pluralistic understanding of the available evidence base of lifelong career guidance (Hooley, 2014). Hooley (2014) concluded that "the review of the evidence base demonstrates that there are clear and observable benefits from life-long guidance" (p.11). At the same time, he recommended that further research be conducted to strengthen the evidence-base in career guidance. Concerning different methodological approaches at present, he argued that the existing literature is too methodologically narrow and that it is important to broaden the range and types of studies as the evidence base is developed.

This leads us to how evidence for career guidance can be accumulated. We are arguing for a broader conceptualization of the concept of evidence-based career guidance. A fundamental dimension then, is to question in what areas of career guidance the evidence is needed.

What Are the Questions in Need of More Evidence?

It is crucial to consider and question the consensus that evidence in relation to career guidance is needed, especially because this is presented as a self-evident fact. For example, in evidence-based medicine, it is recommended that producing evidence-based knowledge should be concentrated on "...tracking down the best external evidence with which to answer our clinical questions" (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71). To identify what counts as evidence, Shaxson (2005) identified five components of evidence robustness (from a policy-making

perspective): credibility, generalizability, reliability, objectivity, and rootedness or authenticity.

Credibility. This relates to the processes of analysing and synthesising information in quantitative literature. Credible evidence relies on a strong and clear line of argument, tried and tested analytical methods, analytical rigour throughout the processes of data collection and analysis, and on clear presentation of the conclusions.

Generalisability (or transferability). This refers to the way in which we make inferences and, therefore, the ease with which it would be possible to take the evidence that has been collected for a specific purpose and to use it in a different context, or to answer a different question. In some cases this will refer primarily to sampling techniques; however, in others, it will refer to the broader framing of the issue and the policy question. It is particularly applicable when pilot studies precede a wider rollout.

Reliability. This relates to whether or not we can depend on the evidence for monitoring, evaluation, or impact assessments - planning for the lessons-learned approach.

Objectivity. This refers to questioning the bias in the evidence base to deepen our understanding of how it conditions our interpretation of the evidence for policy.

Rootedness (or authenticity). This implies more than context, process, bias, and the quality of information. Rather, it is about understanding the nuance of the evidence, exploring assumptions with an open mind, encouraging others to question the status quo, and thinking about who uses what evidence for what purpose.

With this in mind, concerning career guidance, the main consideration is: What are the questions to answer in career guidance? A fundamental aspect of career guidance has been, and still is, how to balance the needs of the individuals and the needs of society. As Watts (1999) suggested, a distinction may be made between career guidance being viewed as a worthy private good, which bestows benefits to individuals who “should have a civic right

to have access to it regardless of the resources at their private disposal, and as a public good which generates social and economic benefits over and above those accruing to the individuals who receive it” (p. 13). In a holistic perspective, one might say that researchers should develop a research strategy that reflects the aspects of benefits to users, to practitioners, and to society as a whole.

However, Plant (2012) argued that there is an ongoing power struggle between representatives of the different needs in relation to defining the priorities between the private and the public good. Douglas (2011) posited that the increasing interest for evidence in career guidance is driven more from an economic policy initiative than from the practitioner side. She argued that career guidance practitioners are subject to the power and influence of the states’ economic and welfare agendas, which may be conflicting with their preferred position of person-centred helping. Kjærgård (2012) suggested that career guidance at the moment is part of a knowledge-economy discourse, and that neo-liberal governance thinking is influencing career guidance practices. This implies that the increased interest for knowledge-based and even evidence-based research and policy-making in career guidance has roots in a political demand for hard facts to provide the basis for the allocation of resources, both human and economic, with a view to outcomes of the services. Thus, society’s capability to utilize the productive potential of its inhabitants, via guidance, is the current prioritized research agenda (Plant, 2012).

In relation to the above-mentioned meta-theory of critical realism, the societal economy-focused voices set the agenda for defining how reality should be defined (the intransitive object), and answers (the transitive object) to how one should act upon the possibilities and challenges in this reality (Danermark et al., 2003). However, this may result in narrow and simplistic research approaches. On the other hand, research is needed and relevant to determine how, why, and to what degree career services might have impact on

societies. After all, with the current political agenda focus on guidance as a remedy to a number of societal challenges (e.g., unemployment, school dropout, inclusion of marginalized groups, gender inequalities, etc.), new thinking and further development of career guidance is crucial, but not at the expense of a number of other questions in establishing research-based knowledge in relation to evidence-based career guidance.

What Will Be the Relevant Research Methods to Answer These Questions?

Systematic reviews of randomized controlled trials (RCT) have become the preferred source of research in medicine “for judging whether a treatment does more good than harm” (Sackett et al., 1996, p. 71). Still, Sackett et al. (1996) provided a warning that one should not make the assumption that one research method fits all relevant questions in medicine. In relation to career guidance, Hiebert et al. (2014) stated that:

RCTs are useful and we would not advocate abandoning RCTs as a methodology, but we resist using RCTs as the sole basis for determining intervention efficacy and we also resist using a traditional hierarchical way of ranking research studies, which inevitably places RCTs at the top of the list and designates all other research approaches as less suitable for making evidence-based practice decisions. (p. 676)

The possible difficulties related to this issue are exemplified in a Danish study (Christensen, & Larsen, 2011). The Danish Clearinghouse of Education was commissioned by the Ministry of Education to review existing research on guidance and counseling in order to determine which approaches or methods for guidance and counseling might best contribute to the policy goals in relation to the transition of young people from primary and lower secondary school to upper secondary education, the transition of young people from upper secondary education to higher education, and guidance and counseling for employed adults. The Danish Clearinghouse has a policy to follow the procedures and software developed at the London-based Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre

(EPPI-Centre). On the basis of the EPPI criteria for good evidence research, the Clearinghouse selected 71 relevant studies from an initial pool of 8,355 potentially relevant references, mainly from the US and the UK, with some from Germany, and a few from Denmark. After further quality assessment, 39 studies passed the EPPI-quality selection standards. Of these, nine were of mixed design, three were qualitative studies, and an overwhelming majority, 27, were quantitative. Some of the reasons for this bias were found in the prescribed EPPI selection process, because the studies to count as evidence-based must adhere to the following criteria (EPPI, 2010):

- Explicit and transparent methods are used
- Piece of research following a standard set of stages
- Accountable, replicable and updateable

It seems fair to wonder whether there was no relevance, value, or even evidence in the discharged studies. However, this was not up for discussion, according to the EPPI criteria. This example indicates that narrow selection criteria tend to narrow the answers, which can lead to technically reliable data on a very narrow basis, and may result in weak conclusions, such as those published by Christensen and Larsen (2011):

We have identified that the timing of guidance and counseling interventions is crucial (not too early and not too late in the schooling process), but it is not possible on the basis of this study to give an exact indication of the right point in time. It is not possible on the basis of this study to determine the role the duration of the guidance counseling process has for its effect. It is not possible on the basis of this study to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of guidance and counseling. (p. 24)

In ELGPN's "Guide to Key Finding for Effective Policy and Practice," a much more pluralistic approach was chosen (Hooley, 2014). Here, articles based on a variety of research methods were included and presented as key findings regarding evidence for effective policy

and practice. Maguire (2004) stated that “it could be argued that, on close inspection, there is a paucity of hard evidence on which to base such claims” (p. 186) regarding the evidence on the outcome of career guidance.

We think these three different approaches to evidence creation show the importance of awareness on the aims of evidence-based research. What counts as evidence? And, will there be differences in these concerns among different types of beneficiaries from career guidance? Evidence should not represent one single approach. Conversely, it can be established at a number of different levels. As an example, Kirkpatrick (1994) identified four levels of impact that can result from training and development intervention: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. We think that this kind of framework, in combination with the questions we proposed earlier, invite researchers to provide soft or hard evidence based on different methodological approaches. A broader research strategy may be needed to answer these questions.

Mixed Method Approaches as a Research Strategy to Support Evidence-Based Practice

Mixed methods research has become important in the human and social sciences in recent years (Cameron 2010). Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) undertook an analysis of 19 different mixed methods definitions and decided upon the following definition:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purpose of breadth of understanding or corroboration. (p. 123)

Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) described five aspects of a mixed method approach: (1) *triangulation* to seek convergence in data; (2) *complementarity* to measure overlapping but different facets of a phenomenon; (3) *development* to help develop or inform the other method(s); (4) *initiation* to discover paradoxes and contradictions, new perspectives of

frameworks, and the recasting of questions or results; and (5) *expansion* to extend the breadth and range of inquiry.

However, mixed-method approaches are not the preferred research approaches in career guidance, internationally. In the annual review of the 2012 career guidance/career development/vocational psychology literature, the conclusion is that mixed-method approaches constitute 6 % of the research articles published (Bikos, Dykhous, Boutin, Gowen, & Rodney, 2013). The quantitative approaches constitute 53 %. In a review of articles in the Australian Journal of Career Development from 2004-2009, Cameron (2010) found that mixed methods research represents 4% of all articles and 6% of empirical articles from this sample. Given the assumption that career guidance is a complex field of study, and the advantages presented from Greene et al. (1989), we are certain that a more holistic research approach is needed, and more mixed-method approaches should be implemented to a larger extent in future research. Still, it is important to notice that we do not suggest a hierarchy with mixed-method approaches as the “gold standard” in career guidance. Hiebert et al. (2014) agreed with Glasziou, Vandenbroucke, and Chalmers (2004) that different kinds of questions require different kinds of methodological approaches; this way of thinking should become the guideline for evidence-based research in the future. The voice of users is a source for further development in this matter.

The Voice of Users

There is a strong consensus that user involvement is important in both quality development and quality assurance in guidance (ELGPN, 2010; OECD, 2004). The concept of user involvement can be described in different levels. At an individual level, the individuals are involved in shaping their own experience of using the service. At a service level, the users are involved in processes of improvement of the service. At a strategic level, the users are participating on a wider strategic level of planning, developing, and reviewing services (Plant,

2006). Based on Arnsteins' (1969) model of eight rungs on a ladder of citizen participation, Plant (2006) operated with a five-level model concerning the engagement of users with guidance services. The level of engagement range from level one where the users are providing information, to level five where the users are active co-constructors in the strategic planning of career guidance services. The purpose of the involvement will decide the appropriate level of involvement. If the purpose of the involvement is to be involved in shaping the personal experience of using the service, level one and two in the model might be appropriate. If the target of the involvement is giving suggestions for improving the operation of the service, level three in the model might be suitable. Finally, if the goal is to involve users in strategic planning, developing, and reviewing the service, levels four and five in the model might be the most appropriate. Plant (2006) argued that user involvement in the development of guidance ensures that policy supports the development of guidance services that meet the needs of individuals, communities, and other stakeholders; the barriers that prevent some groups from accessing services can be identified and addressed; the quality of guidance services is enhanced when users are involved in all stages of their development; and good practice can be identified and disseminated.

Nevertheless, Plant (2012) argued that despite good intentions, the users are seldom given a voice in these matters. A comparative study in the Nordic countries was undertaken to investigate user involvement in guidance (Vilhjálmssdóttir, Dofradóttir, & Kjartansdóttir, 2011). The study was conducted in two phases. First, focus group interviews of users, practitioners, and managers in adult guidance services were conducted in the five Nordic countries. In the second phase, researchers used a web survey of users of guidance services in adult educational institutions in all five countries. One of the research questions was "to describe if and how adult users of guidance have an impact on the services provided, as well as to compare user involvement in adult guidance in the Nordic countries" (Vilhjálmssdóttir et

al., 2011, p. 9). The research questions were organized in accordance to Plant's (2006) model of level of participation. The results indicated that users were not systematically involved in providing feedback on services or participating in shaping services in career guidance in the Nordic countries. Around half of the respondents (49-55%) in Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden reported that they had not been given a chance to evaluate guidance services. Between 75% and 92% of the respondents, depending on country, stated that they had not participated in any decision making or designing of strategies concerning guidance services. In response to a question concerning a preferred future practice, all three groups of respondents were inspired by the vision of more systematic user involvement in developing career services. Although inspired, managers and practitioners, especially, found this unrealistic to carry out in practice. Their main argument was that it would be difficult to find representatives for a multifaceted group of users, especially if the users were to be involved as partners in ongoing structural and institutional development. To summarize, guidance users feel that it is important that they are consulted, and they are interested in having their voices heard concerning different aspects of guidance services. By contrast, practitioners and managers do not see how it could be established. Thus, in terms of using the richness of the experience of the actual users to create substantive evidence, this is a missed opportunity.

This particular piece of Pan-Nordic research is interesting for a number of reasons, because it supports the notion that users could be potential partners in creating evidence-based knowledge. At policy and organizational levels, it would be possible to invite users to focus groups as a part of the strategic planning aspect of service provision. Accordingly, Hughes and Gration (2009) stressed "the importance of linking policy, practice, research and theory. Missing one of these components weakens evidence-based policy making in the guidance field" (p. 10). This aligns with an action research approach, which creates a space for involving users and as co-researchers. Carr and Kemmis (1986) stated that:

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process. (pp. 165-66)

In short, in involving users as co-producers of evidence, action research based approaches have the potential to create firm links between policy, practice, and research. In our opinion, such links are badly needed.

From Evidence Creation to Evidence-Based Practice and Policy-Making

Neary and Hutchinson (2009) described a mismatch between available evidence and the use made of it in practice and in policy-making. Douglas (2011) argued that one explanation is that incongruence stems from the discrepancy between the evidence, which is provided on the one hand, and the values of the practitioners on the other. Going back to the origin of evidence-based medicine, Cochrane (1972) observed that the available evidence was removed or disconnected from the people who ought to be using it to improve the care of patients.

Another explanation could be that the training programs provided do not emphasize research-based knowledge. This correlates with the mandate of The Canadian Research Working Group for Evidence-Based Practice in Career Development (CRWG) to promote the implementation of an evaluation culture in the career development practice (Magnusson & Lalande, 2005). Irving and Barker (2004) proposed that research activities should be a key

component of professional and personal development for academics and practitioners, to ensure that “real world” challenges are recognized, and to maintain the professionalism of careers practice within a rapidly changing world. One such example is found in the training in career guidance at Lillehammer University College (LUC), Norway, the base of which is an action research approach (LUC, 2014). The students, who are mostly experienced adults, acquire theoretical and research based knowledge on campus, then return to their practice field to do small action research projects.

Herr (2003) suggested the creation of national research databases to collect and distribute such information. In other professions, like education and health professions, different databases have been developed. In career guidance, such databases have been established, aimed at practitioners and policy makers at the International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy (ICCDPP), which was established in 2004 with the support of different international stakeholders. The webpage is divided into two sections. One is a policy and research section containing studies, reports, and other publications categorized mainly according to the sub-themes of the European Commission and OECD (2004) joint publication “Career guidance: A handbook for policy makers.” The other is a resources section containing all of the studies, reports, and publications in the database presented in chronological order. The ELGPN established a database of lifelong guidance-related initiatives and from the ELGPN-member countries. The cases are selected and promoted by the national ELGPN representatives, categorized in accordance to the priorities of the EU Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies, and the OECD/EU handbook for guidance policy makers (EU, 2008; OECD, 2004). Both ELGPN and ICCDPP initiatives are examples an open method of coordination (Kjærgård, 2012), where recommendations on further professionalization and systems’ improvement are based on examples of best practices.

As a further example, in the UK, the National Guidance Research Forum (NGRF) website was first launched in 2004 for careers guidance practitioners and researchers as a collaborative project between the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER), the University of Warwick, the International Centre for Guidance Studies, the University of Derby, and KnowNet, a specialist software company. The NGRF is a shared, web-based knowledge base that seeks to bridge the gap between career guidance research and practice. The lessons learnt from the establishment of NGRF represent an important input in further development. They concluded that:

A challenge is how to present and interpret that body of formal knowledge in an accessible way relevant to the practices of different communities and to facilitate interaction between the informal knowledge generated in the communities with more traditional forms of knowledge. Web based textbooks, manuals or formal training courses are useful but not enough. Good search engines are essential. But, we also need to develop new ecologies and taxonomies (or even ontologies) which can describe and structure that knowledge in a way that is useful for those participating in the knowledge development process. (Bimrose et al., 2005, p. 6)

A few years later a similar Pan-European European Guidance and Counselling Research Forum (EGCRF) was established; this is now dismantled. What these laudable initiatives have in common is the need for transparency and for creating an overview of the knowledge and the evidence already available in the guidance field. At present, much such information is not readily accessible. It sits in different organizations with no or few links to the guidance community.

Conclusion

Much evidence already has been produced with a view to inform practice and policy in the career guidance field. And some evidence is produced to legitimize particular policies.

However, much of the available evidence is of limited scope, based on narrow, mostly quantitative, research approaches and, in some cases, narrowly linked to particular current and pressing policy agendas (Plant, 2012). Herein, we have argued for a more pluralistic and holistic approach to the process of gathering, assessing, and using evidence-based knowledge. We have highlighted the importance of involving the voice of users as a source in the gathering process, and have argued that the research questions, both from practitioners and policy makers should guide the assessment of preferable methodological research designs. On the basis of the complexity in the concept of career guidance, we have proposed that mixed method approaches can be a methodological design to capture the many patterns of understanding reality. No single approach will suffice.

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