

Adult Guidance in Ireland: New Theories, New Practice?

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Adult educational and career guidance practice is still relatively new in Ireland in comparison to other countries in Europe and further afield. Since 2000, the Adult Educational Guidance Initiatives (AEGI's) have been enabling and guiding adults to progress into education, training and employment.

However, in the space of six years, dramatic changes in work structures and social organization have occurred that are placing demands on adults to rethink their careers on a longterm basis. Added to this, are current Government policies that emphasise the need for continuous education for future economic and social mobility in an increasingly competitive global environment. Future investment in our 'knowledge economy' through higher education and 4th level qualifications will no doubt raise the bar for individual attainment. While, these developments are criticised by some theorists as focusing too much on individual successes, competitive individualism and the creation of wider gaps between skilled and unskilled workers in the future, (Nihof, 2005), there is no doubt it will require adults to engage in repeated career decision-making across the lifespan.

In light of such changes, guidance practitioners may need to examine new models or approaches to deal with a diverse range of clients in their current practice, as well as contribute to policy decision making for future development of guidance activities at a national level. Within this context, a brief overview of more recent theoretical perspectives and international developments in guidance are provided here.

Theoretical Paradigms in Career Guidance

Historically, the main theoretical perspectives that have informed career guidance come from a number of different disciplines including: psychology, education, sociology and labour economics. Psychological perspectives are now being questioned by theorists who propose more integrated models that take account of both the psychological and sociological elements of guidance. In particular, the differential paradigms of Parsons and Holland apply a positivistic viewpoint that both help individuals rationally choose occupations and provide practitioners with an objective model to work with. However, changes in work patterns now require paradigms that enable people to draw meaning from the role of work in their lives and self manage their careers in the future, (Savickas, 1997). More recently, constructivist approaches (e.g. the narrative paradigm) have come to the fore to enable clients to become more active agents in their own lives, (Savickas, 1997, Watts, 1999, McMahon & Patton, 2006).

In response to psychological theories of career development that may reflect European-American values of individualism, autonomy and the centrality of work in people's lives and may not be shared by people from other countries, other perspectives need to be examined. Consideration also needs to be given to the sociological aspect of career development. Structural theories are concerned with the structural constraints within which career guidance counseling takes place and explain careers in terms of social environments, labour market segregation, family background, social position and cultural capital (Kidd 2006).

To help adults deal with lifetime education and work transitions career theory now needs to be more interactive and dynamic. Kidd (2006) proposes a threefold model of career development skills that incorporate *career decision-making*, *career management* and *career resilience*. It attends to a number of elements for the individual including; relationships with economic and social institutions, construction of unfolding careers over time, decision-making on progression in work and learning, and emotional resilience in the context of uncertain labour markets and diverse career options. The philosophy of this model is reflected in recent career development frameworks in a number of different countries.

International Frameworks and Blueprints for Career Development

The *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* aims to provide a framework that specifies the competencies that all Australians need in order to build their careers across the lifespan. It also provides a mechanism for guiding career information and career development services in the future. It recognizes the fact that it is no longer the case that individuals engage in one experience of career decision-making, usually at the transition point of learning into work. They will now have to take responsibility for constructing their own careers across the lifespan and it is vital for career development services to assist individuals to navigate these complexities.

In particular, the Blueprint emphasizes the need for individuals to develop “meta-competencies” to manage their lives, work and learning in the 21st century. As well as technical and job-specific skills, they will need to have learning, life management and communication skills that are not occupation specific and are transferable across all facets of life and work (McMahon et al, 2003).

Similar frameworks have been developed in the United States (*National Career Development Guidelines K-Adult Handbook*, NOICC, 1996) and Canada (*Blueprint for Life/Work Designs*, Hache et al, 2000). These frameworks and blueprints are emphasising career development and career guidance provision in holistic terms across the lifespan, as opposed to ad hoc, fragmented and uncoordinated approaches that had previously been in existence.

From a European perspective, despite the gaps and inconsistencies that have been found in quality standards in guidance provision (OECD, 2004), some countries are now starting to implement quality assurance systems. Careers Scotland and the Danish Guidance System provide strong examples of benchmarking future best practice that as practitioners and stakeholders in guidance we might like to reflect on.

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