



Information approaches and the construction of 'good' guidance in career guidance counsellors' professional practice

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Abstract

Adopting a reflexive research approach, this study offers insights into how career guidance counsellors (CGCs) conceptualise the role of information in their work with students, and how its use aligns with their notions of good practice. In total, 25 CGCs were interviewed to describe and reflect on how they support upper secondary students' transition to continuing education and work. The iterative engagement between theory and data enabled the identification of five different approaches to information use in guidance practice. The five approaches embody a spectrum of theoretical orientations, ranging from traditional matching paradigms to emancipatory perspectives. The analysis highlights an information paradox, concluding that information may have multiple roles in guidance. Although matching-oriented perspectives on information are prominent in their everyday practices, this study suggests that information use grounded in developmental and socially informed theoretical frameworks aligns more closely with CGCs' conceptions of good guidance.

Keywords Labour market information · Guidance practice · Career education

Résumé

Adoptant une démarche de recherche réflexive, cette étude apporte un éclairage sur la manière dont les conseillers d'orientation (CO) conceptualisent le rôle de l'information dans leur travail auprès des élèves, ainsi que sur la façon dont son utilisation s'articule avec leur conception des bonnes pratiques. Vingt-cinq CO ont été interrogés afin de décrire et d'analyser la manière dont ils accompagnent la transition des élèves de l'enseignement secondaire vers la poursuite d'études ou l'insertion professionnelle. L'articulation itérative entre théorie et données a permis d'identifier cinq approches distinctes de l'utilisation de l'information dans la pratique

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de l'accompagnement. Ces cinq approches reflètent un éventail d'orientations théoriques, allant des paradigmes traditionnels de l'appariement à des perspectives émancipatrices. L'analyse met en évidence un paradoxe de l'information, concluant que celle-ci peut jouer des rôles multiples dans l'accompagnement. Bien que les perspectives centrées sur l'appariement soient prédominantes dans leurs pratiques quotidiennes, cette étude suggère qu'un usage de l'information fondé sur des cadres théoriques développementaux et socialement informés correspond davantage à la conception que les CO se font d'un accompagnement de qualité.

Zusammenfassung

Im Rahmen eines reflexiven Forschungsansatzes bietet diese Studie Einblicke darin, wie Berufsberaterinnen und Berufsberater (BB) die Rolle von Information in ihrer Arbeit mit Schülerinnen und Schülern konzeptualisieren und wie deren Nutzung mit ihren Vorstellungen guter Beratungspraxis übereinstimmt. Es wurden 25 BB interviewt, um zu beschreiben und zu reflektieren, wie sie den Übergang von Schülerinnen und Schülern der Sekundarstufe II in weiterführende Bildung und Beruf unterstützen. Die iterative Auseinandersetzung mit Theorie und empirischen Daten ermöglichte die Identifikation von fünf unterschiedlichen Ansätzen zur Informationsnutzung in der Beratungspraxis. Diese fünf Ansätze spiegeln ein Spektrum theoretischer Orientierungen wider, das von traditionellen Matching-Paradigmen bis hin zu emanzipatorischen Perspektiven reicht. Die Analyse hebt ein Informationsparadox hervor und kommt zu dem Schluss, dass Information in der Beratung vielfältige Rollen einnehmen kann. Obwohl matching-orientierte Informationsperspektiven in der alltäglichen Praxis der BB eine zentrale Rolle spielen, legt die Studie nahe, dass eine an entwicklungspsychologischen und sozialwissenschaftlichen Theorierahmen orientierte Informationsnutzung stärker mit den Vorstellungen guter Beratung der BB übereinstimmt.

Resumen

Adoptando un enfoque de investigación reflexivo, este estudio ofrece perspectivas sobre cómo los orientadores vocacionales (OV) conceptualizan el papel de la información en su labor con los estudiantes y cómo su uso se relaciona con sus nociones de buena práctica. Se entrevistó a 25 OV para que describieran y reflexionaran sobre cómo apoyan la transición de los estudiantes de educación secundaria superior hacia la educación continua y el mundo laboral. La interacción iterativa entre teoría y datos permitió identificar cinco enfoques diferentes respecto al uso de la información en la práctica orientadora. Estos cinco enfoques representan un espectro de orientaciones teóricas, que van desde paradigmas tradicionales de correspondencia hasta perspectivas emancipadoras. El análisis pone de relieve una paradoja de la información, concluyendo que la información puede desempeñar múltiples funciones en la orientación. Aunque las perspectivas orientadas a la correspondencia son predominantes en las prácticas cotidianas, este estudio sugiere que el uso de la información fundamentado en marcos teóricos de carácter desarrollista y socialmente informado se ajusta más estrechamente a las concepciones de buena orientación de los OV.

Introduction

Whilst efforts have been made to identify strategies and activities that can support young people's career learning (e.g. Poulsen, 2020), the specific content of career learning activities and the role(s) that career information may have within guidance practices is often overlooked (Bimrose, 2021). This limited attention to information contributes to what Staunton and Rogosic (2021) describe as rationalistic perspectives on information in guidance, where it is treated as factual and neutral. Such an approach may be problematic, particularly in light of the increasingly complex and fragmented information landscape. Hence, what information young people access, from whom and in what context influences their developing knowledge of education, occupations and the labour market (Bimrose, 2021), as well as their perceptions of which career options are available and desirable (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

Given that young people now engage with a wide array of information from diverse sources, none of which can be considered entirely neutral (Staunton, 2022), it is crucial that they develop the ability to critically assess and manage this information when building knowledge about career options (Milosheva et al., 2021). Career guidance counsellors (CGCs) can play a key role in supporting students in this process (Pallin, 2024). Hence, this study highlights the role of information within career guidance practice, exploring how information is perceived and utilised from the perspective of career guidance counsellors in Swedish upper secondary schools.

In addition to navigating this complexity of information, Swedish students face unequal access to education and employment opportunities, alongside disparities in resources between schools and their organisers (Lundahl et al., 2020a, 2020b). Previous research from a Swedish context and international reports has shown that students' career trajectories are strongly influenced by their social background and local context (OECD, 2025; Rosvall et al., 2018). Career guidance has the potential to mitigate some of these inequalities stemming from uneven resource distribution (Hooley et al., 2021). A central aspect of this work may involve supporting students in developing the knowledge and skills needed to make informed decisions about their future. In Sweden, as in other countries, this is framed as the development of career competence (Swedish: *Valkompetens*) (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013; Thomsen, 2014).

Although Swedish national policy state that career guidance aims to support the development of career competence, the pathway to achieving this remains unclear. Whilst guidance is framed as a whole-school responsibility, each school authority and principal decide how it is organised and implemented. Research shows this responsibility is often delegated to the CGC (Lundahl et al., 2020a, 2020b; Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). To better understand the conditions under which young people's career learning is shaped, and how guidance can support the development of career competence, there is a need for deeper insight into the work of CGCs and their approaches to information. This study contributes to such knowledge by examining the perspectives of CGCs

working in upper secondary education, a sector that has received comparatively less attention than compulsory schooling within Swedish career guidance research.

The purpose of this study is to explore how CGCs use information in their interaction with students, and how their practices reflect underlying norms of possible roles for information in guidance. By examining the approaches and rationales that underpin CGCs' information practices, the study aims to shed light on the implications for professional practice in context of supporting students' career development. Research questions guiding the study are:

1. What career information do CGCs use, in what way and for what purpose in their contact with students?
2. How do CGCs' descriptions of information use reflect underlying norms of what constitutes 'good' guidance practice?

The following section begins with a brief overview of the Swedish educational context, followed by a review of previous research and career theory concerning information provision within guidance practices. The methodological section introduces the reflexive strategy that underpins the study and informs the integration of results, analysis, and discussion in the analysis section (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis section begins by presenting five distinct approaches to information provision used by CGCs, thereby responding to the first research question. These are subsequently discussed through the lens of the participants' notions of good guidance practice and the emergent information paradox, which aligns with the second research question. The article concludes with a set of reflections on implications for practice.

Context

In Sweden, upper secondary school spans 3 years (grades 10–12) and includes 18 national programmes, 12 vocational preparatory programmes (VET) and 6 higher education preparatory programmes (HEP). Urban areas usually offer a wide range of schools and programmes, whilst rural areas often have limited or no options. Whereas HEP programmes confer eligibility for higher education, VET programmes are designed to equip students with practical skills for immediate employment in professions such as carpentry, electrical work, hairdressing or nursing assistance, for example. However, public adult education and higher education offer viable pathways for students seeking a career change later in life (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023; Swedish Education Act, 2010).

According to the national curriculum, students should be provided with access to information and opportunities to reflect on their career choices throughout their upper secondary education, to develop career competence and facilitate their transitions to continuing education and work (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013). Schools are also expected to supply the local and regional labour

market with workforce (Swedish Education Act, 2010). CGCs thus operate in the intersection of individuals, societal and labour market interests (Lundahl et al., 2020a, 2020b). However, as their roles are not formally regulated and guidance activities are unscheduled, CGCs have considerable professional autonomy, whilst schools also have great freedom to organise career guidance (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). This flexibility has raised concerns about students' equal rights to guidance, as research shows disparities in how guidance is planned and delivered across regions with unequal resources (Lundahl et al., 2020a, 2020b; Rosvall, 2020).

CGCs typically hold a bachelor's degree in career guidance and counselling, a qualification offered at only three universities, making the profession relatively small but well connected, with its own ethical guidelines and association (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022).

The notion of career information

As the concept career information is central to this study, the following section explores its varying meanings and conceptualisations, some of which differ from how the term is employed in the present study.

In this paper, the concept of career information is applied with an understanding of information to be the material young people use to build knowledge on career options. By adopting such a broad perspective on information, the subjective aspects of individual's career learning and content in such processes is acknowledged. Thus, what is perceived as reliable and valuable information may vary according to person and its social and geographical position (Hodkinson, 2008; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Career information may therefore incorporate a variety of material. Both informal and formal sources of information are then incorporated, with human and non-human providers (Supeno et al., 2022), on topics regarding education, occupations and the labour market. Moreover, similar to the knowledge suggested to build career competence (Thomsen, 2014), the information needed to ease, resolve and address situations arising in career development may incorporate information on how to make decisions and learn about oneself, which in this paper is understood to also include 'grapevine knowledge', such as advice, opinions and recommendations made by others (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

However, labour market information (LMI) is probably the most commonly used term, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, referring to information received from the labour market about occupations and the labour market (Alexander et al., 2019; Bimrose, 2021). Alexander et al. (2019) highlight that stakeholders within the labour market (such as private organisations, companies and official government institutions) commonly deliver such information, however, with perhaps different mission and purposes. Staunton (2022) emphasises that such stakeholders have their own agendas underpinning ontological and epistemological views on the world of work that are reflected in the information produced and given by them. Therefore, Alexander (2023) argues that the LMI concept represents the perspectives of the labour market and the organisations operating within those structures. Such

perspectives, she argues, bring neo-liberal values such as being employable into the content of LMI, and may thus relate to a matching paradigm within career guidance.

By rationalistic perspectives on career learning and decision-making, Staunton (2022) describes that LMI tends to position as neutral to individuals in their career choices. Rather than exploring the various assumptions underpinning information provided to youth, previous studies concerning information in career guidance seem more concerned about the accuracy and quality of information (e.g. Sampson et al., 2018). Such focus assumes information is possible to be objective, although it is far from neutral and depends on who brings the information and in what context (Staunton, 2022). As the concept of career information is used in this text, it does not exclude the inclusion of content traditionally described as LMI. Rather, the distinction between the concepts aims to clarify the breadth and potential variation of what may be considered part of young people's career learning, something that, from the socio-cultural perspective adopted in this text, would encompass more than just LMI.

Therefore, all types of information discussed by the participants were considered potential career information in this study. Their selection of materials, sources and how they used information in interactions with students were analysed to understand their approach to career information and their perceptions of what constitutes 'good practice' in guidance activities.

Career theories and career information

This section presents various theoretical currents that have influenced, and continue to influence, CGCs' use of information in practice. These theories, which have been clustered into four overarching theoretical perspectives, have informed the analytical process, which follows a theory-cycling approach. The perspectives presented here were initially part of the researcher's pre-understanding of guidance practice, and after the coding process started, applied as interpretative categories in the analysis.

Matching perspectives

For a long time, ideas about matching individuals with professions and education have been central to career guidance. Person–environment fit and trait and factor theories, starting with Parsons (1909), describe individual career choices from a technocratic logic where they should find 'true reasoning' in the labour market, pairing individuals' interests and characteristics with occupations (Holland, 1985; van Vianen, 2018). These theories can be linked to a logical positivist world view, assuming that rational decisions can be made on the basis of objective and neutral knowledge (Patton, 2008). Despite substantial criticism, these ideas remain influential, as seen in Holland's (1985) theory of vocational personalities and work environments, which still has significant traction in career guidance. Within this paradigm, the career guidance counsellor assumes the role of an expert, where information is viewed as objective and correct answers are considered attainable (Alexander et al., 2019).

Developmental and social perspectives

However, along with changes in time and contexts, the trend shifted towards emphasising developmental and social perspectives on individuals' careers (McMahon, 2014; Patton, 2008), which requires CGCs to adopt the role of facilitators or perhaps educators in support of individuals career development (Alexander et al., 2019). Within these perspectives, commonly used models, such as Egan's (2018) Skilled Helper Model suggest that CGCs should exercise caution when sharing information. Instead, they are encouraged to support individuals in exploring alternatives from their own viewpoints and in developing the ability to manage information independently. In line with this, traditional LMI can be seen as adopting a more passive role. Correspondingly, the CGC steps back from the position of expert and instead adopts a more egalitarian stance in relation to the student, one that is better characterised as a partnership and a form of guided participation in the guidance process (Peavy, 2001).

Learning perspectives

Drawing on learning theories in career development, CGCs would support student learning by identifying opportunities and fostering competencies for career management and adaptability in the face of uncertainty (Mitchell et al., 1999). From this perspective, individuals' immediate environments are seen as valuable sources communicating impressions, images and data that shape their understanding of self, education and the labour market (Law, 1981). Encouraging students to actively seek, evaluate and apply information would therefore be central to a learning-oriented approach to career guidance. According to Law's (1999) revised DOTS model¹, this... this learning unfolds in four sequential stages: sensing, sifting, focussing and understanding, with each building on the previous. The initial stage, acquiring impressions such as information, is essential for further learning. In this context, CGCs are seen as educators in this paper, given the parallels with teaching and the emphasis on long-term learning. This contrasts with Bimrose's (2021) earlier categorisation, which links the educator role with constructivist approaches, perspectives that, in this text, are instead associated to the role Peavy (2001) suggested of a participatory guide.

Constructivist perspectives

From a constructivist perspective, CGCs would support young people in constructing knowledge on the basis of their subjective experiences, encouraging reflection on

¹ the original DOTS model was developed by Law and Watts (1977) and focuses what can be learned within a career guidance process, summarising this learning into four areas: decision making (D), opportunity awareness (O), transition skills (T), and self-awareness (S) (DOTS). Building on these learning areas, Law (1999) later revised the model to include aspects of how learning occurs; in this text, this version is referred to as the revised DOTS model. Add to reference list: Law, B. & Watts, A.G. (1977). *Schools, Careers and Community*. London: Church Information Office.

career information from various sources within their personal ‘life space’ (Savickas et al., 2009). In this view, learning about career options is primarily understood as a process meaning-making, where the individual’s interpretation of information takes precedence over the information itself (Bimrose, 2021). The CGCs’ role would thus be to help young people interpret and contextualise information in relation to their unique situations (Savickas et al., 2009), acting as a participatory guide in the student’s ongoing construction of reality within an ever-changing world (Peavy, 2001).

Emancipatory perspectives

In addition to the previously discussed theoretical perspectives, issues of social justice and emancipatory approaches have gained increasing prominence in career guidance research (Hooley et al., 2021). However, such values have long been considered a fundamental element of the field (Plant & Kjaergård, 2016). These perspectives are often rooted in various strands of critical theories, which provide different arguments for why guidance can, and should, serve as a means to reduce inequalities between individuals and groups in the society (Arthur, 2014; Sultana, 2025). Hooley et al. (2021) argue that socially just guidance practices involve, amongst other things, fostering critical consciousness, naming oppression and questioning dominant norms. This includes using information not only to support students’ self-awareness and understanding of their environment, but also to help them recognise injustice and challenge societal norms.

Emancipatory approaches can be linked to the progressive and radical practices described by Watts (1996), which aim to promote individual and social transformation. In practice, this may involve the CGC adopting the role of an ‘agent for change’ supporting individuals and groups in envisioning and pursuing alternative futures (Hooley et al., 2021). At the same time, social and developmental theoretical traditions may align with what Watts (1996) terms a liberal approach, one that emphasises non-directive support, allowing individuals to make autonomous career decisions. This stands in contrast to the conservative approach, where guidance is shaped by external demands, such as those of the labour market, and seeks to direct individuals accordingly (Watts, 1996).

Methodology

This study adopts a reflexive thematic approach, meaning that its focus has been shaped through an iterative reflective process during data collection and subsequent analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). However, the study is part of a larger research project aimed at exploring the organisation and implementation of career learning activities in upper secondary schools. As such, certain aspects of the research design, such as selecting participants and planning interviews, were determined by the project’s framework. These considerations are briefly outlined in the following paragraph, which is followed by an account of the process conducting and analysing the interviews.

Sampling

Given that schools may differ in their practices depending on local context, the project aimed to achieve informational richness by capturing a variety of school practices across different geographical areas and school types. Hence, participants were selected using a clustered purposeful sampling strategy. Municipalities were categorised by urbanity, demography, population size and access to higher education, resulting in three clusters: large cities (more than 200,000 inhabitants with more than one higher education institution), mid-size cities (40,000–200,000 inhabitants with at least one higher education institution) and rural communities (fewer than 15,000 inhabitants with low levels of commuting and no higher education institution)(SALAR, 2022). Within each cluster, school organisers were randomly selected to ensure geographical spread and diversity in educational orientation (HEP/VET), including both municipal and independent schools.

In total, 20 schools from 17 organisers participated: 4 in rural areas, 10 in mid-sized cities, and 6 in large cities. One or two CGCs from each school unit were invited, and 25 accepted (several schools had only one CGC). The participants had varied backgrounds, with 1–39 years of experience (15 years), and held bachelor's degrees in career guidance from Swedish universities (except for one holding a bachelor's degree in social work).

Conducting and analysing interviews

On the basis of the project aim, an interview guide was developed covering four main topics: one in which the CGC described their own background and the school context; one focussing on group-based activities for students; one addressing individual guidance practices; and one concerning the broader organisational and municipal structures for planning and delivery. The analysis presented in this paper primarily focusses on the second and third topics.

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted between November 2023 and May 2024, preferably in person at the CGCs' offices, each lasting approximately 60 min. Some interviews were held digitally, typically following an in-person visit to the school and CGC. However, five interviews were conducted entirely online due to practical constraints. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author.

As I personally conducted all interviews and met participants at their workplaces, the analytical process began early. For instance, I took notes during school visits, and during data generation conducting interviews, I asked exploratory questions and followed up on topics I perceived as relevant to deepen the focus. Hence, already in the first interview, a phenomenon emerged that captured my interest: the interviewee described their own practice using notions of 'good' and 'proper' guidance, which I followed up on. As this way of speaking about practice recurred amongst several participants, without me bringing the topic, I paid particular attention to asking them to elaborate on what they meant by these evaluations. The interaction between myself and the participants

can therefore be understood as a co-construction of knowledge, shaped by our respective positions and the context of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

From the position being a trained CGC with prior work experience in youth guidance (though not within upper secondary education), my background likely influenced how I interpreted the participants' descriptions. This includes sensitivity to specific terminology and shared professional language, as well as latent coding and the interpretation of what is communicated 'between the lines'. Additionally, my role as an educator in career guidance at one of the three universities offering such training in Sweden may have affected participants' willingness to take part in the study, as well as the openness with which they shared their experiences. Hence, my insider position may have influenced the participants' construction of good guidance, as they might have felt a need to demonstrate their knowledge of guidance practices and to affirm understandings shaped by their training. Likewise, my own position made me particularly attentive to such expressions.

I continued taking notes whilst listening to the interviews and reviewing their transcripts. Codes were developed for each individual interview and later compared across the dataset to formulate shared codes, for example, such as 'information content', 'notion of information', 'material used', 'what is guidance', 'what is not guidance', 'activities performed', 'activities aimed for' and 'resistance'. At this stage, theoretical cycling was initiated, involving a back-and-forth movement through the data to identify potential patterns between codes. The interpretation was carried out both inductively and deductively: I recognised patterns from my own professional experience, which led me to consult various theoretical frameworks to articulate these patterns. Initially, I focussed on the participants' agency, but what proved most meaningful to me was interpreting their patterns through career theory, as these are the theoretical influences likely to underpin their practice. The development of themes was thus an iterative process between empirical data and theory, shaped by the interplay between my own and the participants' positions.

Five themes representing the participants' different ways of working with information were developed and are described as five information approaches in the first part of the analysis-section: the directive, transmissive, educative, reflective and critical approach. A sixth theme, reflecting the participants' understanding of good guidance practice, is presented in the second part of the analysis section, titled *The ambition for good guidance*.

Whilst the insider perspective enriched the study through contextual familiarity and interpretative depth, it also introduces methodological limitations, including challenges to replicability and the risk of researcher bias. In an effort to mitigate potential bias associated with the insider position, I have maintained a commitment to transparency in relation to the participants and engaged in ongoing critical self-reflection regarding my stance and interactions with the participants and the empirical material. The study has been conducted in alignment with the Swedish Research Council's (2024) guidelines for good research practice. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study, and measures were taken to ensure anonymity in such a way that no individual participant can be traced to a specific school or municipality.

Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke (2022), the analysis section integrates results, analysis and discussion, beginning with participants' information practices and moving on to their rationales for good guidance.

Information approaches in guidance practice

The participants describe a diverse use of career information when meeting with their students, shifting in content and provision depending on the contextual situation. The career information that is shared, and in what forms, depends on a variety of factors related to the situation of the student(s), the staff, the school and the local community. Five interrelated approaches were constructed in the analytical process, which to varying degrees, were represented in the participants' guidance practice. Thus, it must be stressed that a single participant cannot be paired with only one approach but several.

In the following text, the five approaches are presented, starting with the approaches that appear most clearly in the participants' talk about their practice. At the end of this section, a structured overview of the identified approaches is presented in Table 1.

The transmissive approach

The first approach to career information, which also seems to be a common approach used by the participants, is the transmissive. Like the strategy described by Alexander et al. (2019) as 'information to give', participants present information as content to be delivered to students, with knowledge intended to be transmitted. Hence, this approach seems closely aligned with a matching theoretical rationale (Bimrose, 2021; Patton, 2008). From this perspective, career information primarily consists of LMI and educational information provided by institutional, non-human sources such as ministries of education and labour (Supeno et al., 2022), as well as labour unions. The material includes information on education and occupations, labour market forecasts, sector trends and recruitment and admission processes. Participants describe this type of information as factual and essential, both for students' decision-making and because it is the most frequently requested content in school-based career guidance.

They want facts. They are not like this 'Now we are going to reflect and ponder' but they are looking for pure facts most of the time (CGC 4).

Within the transmissive approach, content selection varies depending on whether guidance is delivered individually or in group settings, such as classroom sessions. In classroom contexts, the participants often base the content on assumptions about students' needs, informed by programme, school year and timing (e.g. admissions

Table 1 Career guidance counsellors' approach to use of information in guidance practice

Information approach	Use of information	Meaning of information	Initiator/stakeholders	Time/space	Underpinning theoretical perspectives
Directive approach	Delivering information with intentions	Information is purposeful	Initiated by external actors	'Here and now'	Matching
Transmissive approach	Delivering information	Information is neutral	On demand by students or initiated by CGCs	'Here and now'	Matching
Educative approach	Teaching information acquisition	Information is neutral	On demand by students or initiated by CGCs	'Now and then'	Learning
Reflective approach	Reflecting on information	Information is subjective	Initiated by CGCs	'From here to the future'	Constructivist
Critical approach	Critically examining/questioning information	Information is political	Initiated by CGCs	'From here to alternative futures'	Emancipatory

periods). As a result, similar information, particularly regarding education and admissions, is repeatedly presented, especially to HEP students. These sessions typically involve pre-selected content delivered via tools such as PowerPoint.

Some sessions are limited to 20 minutes, others 30 or 40 minutes, so you really have to rush through it. During that time, then I go through my PowerPoint that I have prepared and then they get to ask questions that I can answer (CGC 12).

In individual meetings, the participants explain that students typically initiate contact with the CGC to seek support on specific issues. These interactions often involve practical questions related to their current situation, such as information about educational programmes, occupations or strategies for navigating admissions processes, particularly during or just before graduation.

Even high-achieving students come to me. But then it's often like this: 'Yes, but how can I maximise my merit points for my university?' or 'If I want to become a doctor, what path should I take?' Once I have informed them about this, they usually feel satisfied, and I don't see them again (CGC 5).

Another participant, working with students who face language barriers, explains that much of her guidance practice involves orally conveying information.

Our students prefer to come to me and receive the information directly. That's not their strong suit. Some do look things up on their own, absolutely, but most prefer to get the information orally... I never tell a student to 'go to this website' and then send them away. Never! That's not how I work, it's simply not part of my approach. If a student comes to me, it's for a reason. The students who are capable of finding the information on their own don't come to me in the first place, so no, I would never do that (CGC 19).

Thus, information transmission is often driven by students' explicit requests or assumed needs. The participants seem to frequently adopt the role of an expert, addressing immediate concerns and 'putting out fires'. They describe this as a necessary response, driven by the concern that students might otherwise miss out on crucial information.

The educative approach

Another prominent approach emphasises supporting students in independently accessing and evaluating information, rather than relying on the CGC to deliver it directly (as in the transmissive approach). This shift redefines the CGC's role from expert to educator, encouraging students to critically engage with information rather than passively receive it.

We also have an important role to challenge that notion a little bit and not come up with ready-made answers from the CGC saying: 'No, it is not like that. It looks like this, and like this' but encourage the students to examine the picture

themselves. To encourage the students to find out information themselves and take a stand on things themselves. That will be our role (CGC 14).

From this perspective, participants argue that students must develop competencies in searching for, assessing and selecting career information aligned with their interests. This aligns with Alexander et al.'s (2019) concept of 'teaching to handle information', and resonates with learning theoretical frameworks (Law, 1999).

After all, it is a career competence, being able to find information, sift through the information and assess it (CGC 11).

In practice, participants describe classroom activities where students are guided in locating information on occupational and educational pathways, particularly using ministry websites. Whilst these sessions are typically initiated by the CGC or teachers, individual guidance sessions often emerge from student–CGC dialogue. Rather than simply answering questions, CGCs encourage students to search for answers collaboratively or independently, often online, sometimes giving them 'homework'.

We sit at the computer, we check, then we read... and then we probably check the statistics, yes, the SWESAT and like that, it's a lot of computer then that we sit checking it together (CGC 7).

This educative approach may foster deeper engagement, where even simple queries can lead to broader discussions and critical reflection (with the CGC applying several information approaches). It may thus prepare students not only for immediate decisions but also for navigating future career challenges. Several participants stress the importance of supporting students in developing these skills, given the overwhelming volume of online information.

Now we have the internet here and, my goodness, you can google as much as you want. But I also think it's sometimes difficult for students to sort through that (CGC 9).

Echoing concerns in previous research (Milosheva et al., 2021; Sampson et al., 2018), participants highlight challenges such as identifying credible sources, interpreting data, maintaining motivation and cultivating curiosity. The educative approach therefore prioritises equipping students with the tools to critically and independently engage with information.

The reflective approach

The third approach centres on reflecting on information together with students. Here, the CGC focusses on the student's subjective interpretation of career information within the context of their life experiences. This approach seems closely aligned with constructivist perspectives on individual career development and guidance practice (Savickas et al., 2009). In this perspective, a broad variety of content and several different providers of career information is included. Hence, in addition to LMI and educational information, opinions, recommendations and rumours are also perceived

to comprise important knowledge. The reflective approach primarily emerges in individual sessions where the CGC initiates opportunities for students to reflect on their situation and the broad range of available information. One participant noted that students rarely request such conversations themselves but views it as the CGC's responsibility to introduce a reflective perspective on information.

It's rare that someone comes and says, 'oh, I'm thinking about what I'm going to be when I grow up. I could have 5 conversations here with you and see myself in a sort of guidance process'. No, it's not like that. But you must, yes you must... you must simply force it on them (CGC 14).

In a reflective approach, CGCs may pose self-reflective questions, revisit earlier discussions, challenge students' interpretations and broaden their perspectives. This includes addressing biases about educational or occupational options and encouraging reflection on a wider range of career paths, an aspect several participants view as central to the guidance mission.

Even if they have a question like this 'I want to become a social scientist, how do I become one?' 'Yes, but then you can cogitate, what do you think would be interesting about it?' So, you try to broaden, widen their perspective and help them reflect on what expectations they have. Then I think that it is more from the individual's perspective, like traditional guidance (CGC 23).

However, the reflective approach also emerges in group settings, particularly in smaller groups of group guidance. These sessions offer opportunities for students to share career-related experiences with peers, fostering collective reflection. Participants who describe such practices emphasise the importance of established relationships in creating a safe environment for deeper dialogue, something they also identify as essential for applying a reflective approach in one-on-one sessions.

The directive approach

Unlike the previously presented approaches, the directive approach is generated on the basis of what the participants consider as contradicting their own practice. The CGCs explain that sometimes, in some schools more frequently than others, external stakeholders request that specific career information be disseminated to pupils. These stakeholders are typically local employers or organisations from the private and/or public sectors, aiming to promote their own activities and communicate current labour demands. In such cases, the selection of career information is made by the stakeholders themselves, reflecting their interests and the needs of the labour market. Some participants describe this approach as a form of 'marketing', which can be understood through a matching theory rationale (Alexander et al., 2019; Staunton, 2022). It can be seen to reflect a conservative stance, where information would be used to steer students' career choices in directions aligned with external stakeholders' needs (Watts, 1996).

In some cases, the request may be made directly to the individual CGC to disseminate specific information (e.g. brochures, websites, or 'spreading the word')

or for the organisation to enter the school. In other cases, the contact may be made through the school organiser, at a municipal level, or other staff at the school, who then invite the external stakeholder. One such example is a private organisation that specialises in offering lessons on the labour market to students of different ages, which some participants explain they usually attend.

We cooperate in the classroom. But they sort of come down from the business world, and the business world has its own way of looking at things. And I have a different way of looking at things. Clashes a bit sometimes (CGC 16).

Whilst participants do not explicitly endorse a directive approach, elements of it are embedded in Swedish policy (Swedish Education Act, 2010), suggesting it is expected of them. Adopting a directive approach involves decisions about what type of information is presented to students. Some participants, especially those working with VET students, report experiencing expectations to guide students towards specific career paths. This includes prioritising information about vocational opportunities within the labour market, rather than presenting options such as higher education, which may be perceived as potentially confusing or less relevant for these students.

But above all, I feel that I have to motivate the students to go into the workforce because they chose a great program... and they [regional employers] are all waiting for them (CGC 3).

Thus, for some participants the directive approach is present when meeting with students both individually and in groups. However, in these cases, the participants seek to justify their approach on the basis of the students' needs for 'accurate' information to be able to secure a position, rather than the labour market's needs.

The critical approach

The critical approach can be explained as the contradiction, or perhaps reaction, to the directive. Adopting a critical approach involves a conscious use of information in guidance, recognising career information as part of a broader learning process about the structural conditions shaping individuals' and groups' career development over time. This approach can be seen closely linked to a rationale grounded in social justice and critical theory (Arthur, 2014; Hooley et al., 2021). Whilst this perspective is less prominent in participants' direct experiences, it features in their reflections on practice. Some describe moments, both in individual and classroom settings, where they adopt a critical stance, such as questioning labour market narratives and encouraging students to critically assess information from external stakeholders.

I usually mention that things will happen now, maybe in our region, which is great in that case then. But there is still not that many facts to really trust (CGC 1).

In addition to adopting a critical perspective on information through comments or questions directed at students, participants also describe instances where they

provide practical support, such as assisting students with job applications, housing searches and applications for financial aid. This approach appears particularly prominent amongst participants working with students who, due to their social, economic and/or geographical position, may be considered vulnerable.

They are tricked into really bad conditions and, so, yes, they need a lot of support for that. About what to expect and what can be accepted (CGC 18).

An important aspect of this approach is that, in addition to guiding students on where and how to find relevant information, the CGC initiates discussions about the information available, both formal and informal, and explores it collaboratively with the students. This can be understood as part of a broader aim to empower students, with the CGC fostering critical consciousness by naming oppression and questioning dominant norms (Hooley et al., 2021). Such an approach reflects an ambition to promote individual and social change and can therefore be linked to progressive and radical stances in guidance practice (Watts, 1996).

Table 1 offers a structured overview of the identified approaches, highlighting distinctions in the use and perceived notion of information, the initiators and stakeholders involved and the temporal dimension underpinning each orientation. These approaches are arranged according to how I have identified them to relate to various theoretical perspectives, ranging from matching paradigms to learning-oriented, constructivist and emancipatory frameworks. This ordering also reflects how participants construct the notion of good guidance practice, a theme that is explored in greater depth in the following section.

The ambition for ‘good’ guidance practice

In this part of the analysis, participants’ ambitions for practice are explored with reference to how they aim to utilise information when meeting with students, foregrounding the theme of ‘good’ guidance as a central concern. This theme was not initially solicited during the interviews but constructed in the conversations, explicitly expressed by most participants. Thus, the participants tend to describe their guidance practice in terms of antonyms when reflecting on the activities and content included. Words such as ‘good’, ‘pure’, ‘traditional’, ‘proper’, ‘real’, ‘true’ and ‘classic’ were used to describe guidance practices they did not consider themselves performing because of the information approaches they used. In this section, it is examined more closely what participants mean by ‘good’ guidance practices and how these align or contrast with their own information activities.

Participants’ ideal practice

Participants’ descriptions of good guidance practice reveal shared views on how such practice should be conducted, primarily through individual guidance sessions that adopt a reflective approach to students’ career development and the information available to them. Constructivist perspectives on young people’s career learning

and development thus appear to underpin participants' ideals of good guidance (Bimrose, 2021; Savickas et al., 2009).

The participants stress the importance of extended sessions, arguing that sufficient time enables deeper student reflection and allows CGCs to challenge assumptions, and drawing on the careership model, broaden students' horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). This is motivated by a desire to make a meaningful difference in young people's career choices and development, with the aim of empowering them. In addition to constructivist ideals, emancipatory aspirations can thus also be interpreted as integral to the participants' conception of good guidance practice (Sultana, 2025).

Just as the sessions should ideally be long, participants argue that guidance should be delivered as an extended process, where individual sessions are one of many activities contributing to students' learning. They highlight the importance of a whole-school approach to guidance, expressing hope that students will be exposed to a variety of experiences, such as study visits or internships, to explore different options. In this way, learning perspectives are also embedded in the guidance participants envision schools should offer (Law, 1999), where the CGCs role is one amongst many supporting students in their transition to further education and work, which reflects the policy ambitions for career guidance, yet appears difficult to realise in practice (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023).

Whilst reflective, critical and educative information approaches are clearly articulated as part of good guidance within individual sessions, these ambitions are less evident in group contexts. There appears to be an ambivalence regarding what constitutes good information practice amongst CGCs with student groups. Hence, some participants express a strong desire to apply reflective and critical information approaches in group guidance sessions, whilst others focus more on incorporating such perspectives into classroom teaching. At the same time, other participants articulate no clear pedagogical goals for group sessions, aside from a general wish for increased frequency and extended time. This ambivalence may be linked to the evolving role of school-based CGCs, which has traditionally centred on individual guidance sessions but is now expanding into a broader professional mandate (Nilsson & Hertzberg, 2022; Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). To support the profession in fulfilling its expanded remit, there is a pressing need for research, ideally co-produced with practitioners, on the development of effective group-based guidance practices.

Between ideals and realities: the information paradox in guidance practice

Although learning perspectives appear central to participants' understanding of how broader guidance provision should be organised, the educative approach seems equally embedded in their own practice when meeting students. It is something they do, but not something they explicitly describe as part of 'good' guidance practice, similar to much of the information work they carry out with students, both individually and in groups. This suggests a dissonance between what participants do

and what they aspire to do, as their expressed ideals for guidance differ from what they describe as their everyday practice.

Whilst social and developmental perspectives are foregrounded in the kind of practice participants aspire to, it is the transmissive information approach, rooted in matching perspectives, that appears most prevalent in their everyday work. On the basis of participants' accounts of good guidance, one might be tempted to interpret this alternative as a form of 'bad' practice. However, such a conclusion about their perceptions of practice would be overly simplistic. Rather, this is one of several implicit tensions expressed in participants' narratives, which, when viewed in relation to their construction of good guidance, reveal a paradox in how information is approached within their professional practice.

Neutral practice and reliable information

To begin with, although not always framed as a hallmark of good guidance, participants consistently emphasise that guidance should be objective and grounded in students' individual interests. This reflects a widely accepted view within the field (SVF, 2018), and aligns with the liberal approach described in Watts' (1996) typology. Their emphasis on providing objective information suggests an underlying belief in learning as the acquisition of neutral knowledge (Staunton & Rogosic, 2021). However, as Staunton (2022) argues, no information source is entirely neutral, highlighting instead the importance of recognising learning as the construction of personally situated knowledge (Staunton & Rogosic, 2021).

As this study shows, participants primarily rely on traditional LMI and educational information, mostly sourced from government websites, and to some extent, labour union materials. As a result, institutional perspectives are given prominence. This likely reflects both trust in official sources and a preference for primary, non-commercial materials, particularly in educational settings. Labour unions are frequently cited, possibly due to their perceived alignment with students rather than employers. This aligns with participants' liberal rationale for practice and may also explain their reluctance to use materials resembling advertising, which can be associated with a conservative stance (Watts, 1996).

However, from the standpoint of young people making career decisions, there is no guarantee that official descriptions, such as those found on ministry websites, are perceived as more accurate or trustworthy than insights shared by family members, friends or school staff with personal experience (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). These perspectives highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes career information within guidance practice. This includes willingness to incorporate diverse forms of information beyond traditional LMI and formal educational data. Informal or experiential knowledge, also referred to as 'grapevine knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998), can offer valuable and personally meaningful insights for young people as they form ideas about their futures. In this context, the objectivity of CGCs would not lie in the materials they use, but in their professional stance.

A concern about misinformation

Secondly, there is a widespread concern that young people may lack sufficient information when making career decisions. To address this perceived gap, participants tend to rely primarily on a transmissive approach, where information is delivered directly to students. Consistent with the findings of Lundahl et al., (2020), many participants in this study are situated in contexts marked by limited resources, particularly manifested in time, and they justify their prioritisation of certain approaches... by emphasising students' need for foundational information to progress in their career development. This includes not only acquiring basic knowledge, but also sparking curiosity, fostering motivation and initiating relationships, elements that can lay the groundwork for a longer-term guidance process (Law, 1999; Mitchell et al., 1999).

Although the use of a transmissive information approach may reflect a technocratic rationale rooted in matching theoretical perspectives, participants often frame their role within a broader learning process. The participants' accounts suggest a process that reflects key elements of the revised DOTS model (Law, 1999), where information provision serves as a shared starting point. The preference for a transmissive rather than an educative approach, despite an overarching learning rationale, can be seen as a way to support diverse learners and ensure equitable access to information. As Sultana (2025) argues, all approaches can engage with emancipatory forms of practice; thus, the prominence of the transmissive approach may also reflect an emancipatory intent.

Although the intention may align with ideals of good guidance, implementation often stops at the initial step. Paradoxically, the strong focus on making information accessible may hinder the development of more holistic practices. Information alone does not ensure learning, and there is a risk that the process ends there, particularly as this appears to be the dominant form of information practice most students encounter. Unless students actively seek individual guidance, or CGCs initiate alternative information approaches in direct or closely connected ways, opportunities for deeper engagement may be missed. Whether this prioritisation is necessary, and what alternative starting points might offer for learning-centred guidance, remain key questions for further research.

Concluding remarks and implications for practice

This study has highlighted how CGCs may adopt different information approaches in their practice, drawing on matching, learning, constructivist and critical theoretical perspectives on information and guidance. It further indicates that both internal and external school structures influence how these approaches and perspectives are prioritised. Overall, however, a liberal orientation towards guidance is reflected in their conception of good guidance (Watts, 1996), accompanied by emancipatory rationales (Sultana, 2025). In conclusion, the analysis suggests that information may serve a variety of functions within CGCs professional practice. Moreover,

information approaches that are grounded in developmental and social theoretically informed perspectives appear to align more closely with Swedish CGCs views on what constitutes good guidance practice.

The information approaches can serve as tools for reflective engagement with one's own professional practice, raising awareness of the roles and approaches one tends to adopt, and how these might be developed further. For instance, if a CGC routinely defaults to a transmissive approach when responding to students' practical questions, it may be worth considering whether alternative approaches could better serve students' needs, not only in the present, but also in 5 or 10 years. This balance between adopting different approaches to students' information needs is an area that also calls for further research, ideally conducted in collaboration with both counsellors and students, to deepen our understanding of how to effectively support students developing career knowledge.

Another important aspect concerns the content of information within guidance practice. As this study argues for a broader understanding of what such content might entail, it suggests that counsellors should also consider how a wider range of information, beyond traditional LMI and educational information, including informal knowledge, can be made accessible through school-based career guidance. This may even involve facilitating the co-creation of such knowledge amongst peers through shared experiences in group guidance activities.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no competing interests to declare.

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