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Careers work in Scottish state secondary schools: the guidance teacher as pastoral firefighter

Peter J. Robertson, Susan Meldrum and Heather Earnshaw

School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the delivery of career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to young people in Scottish state secondary schools. It explores the role of guidance teachers, and the influence of national policy initiatives, curriculum guidelines and external agencies on their work. The perspective of teachers is the central focus for this research. Research interviews were conducted with 10 guidance teachers and contextualised with input from five topic experts. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Key issues reported by participants included growing demands on their time, difficulty with role boundaries, lack of training, and regional variation in provision for education-employer links. Areas for policy and practice improvement are identified. These include recommendations for staff roles, quality standards, and training.

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Career Education, Information, Advice and Guidance in Scotland

Career education, information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG) is an umbrella term for complementary activities in and around schools. The purpose of these activities is to support young people to make informed choices about their future career pathway in education and into work (Progress Careers, 2024). It is a term favoured by policymakers in the UK. The label is less commonly used by practitioners, but it has the advantage of being broad and inclusive, encompassing all careers-related interventions. CEIAG activities might include careers lessons in the curriculum, individual guidance, access to information resources, parental involvement, and a variety of activities involving employers, including work experience, visiting speakers, career fairs, industrial visits and mentoring. This study focuses on Scotland, where CEIAG provision has a strong international reputation, and is well resourced. A recent estimate suggests that £240 million per annum is spent in Scotland on provision of CEAIG for young people aged 10–25 years, equivalent to £160 per head (Hooley et al., 2021).

Guidance in Schools

The concept of "guidance" in Scottish secondary schools dates back at least to the 1960s (Scottish Education Department, 1968). Central to this function is the role of the "guidance teacher", which became established with the publication of *More than Feelings of Concern* (Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum, SCCC, 1986). This defined the role as supporting the personal, social,

CONTACT Peter J. Robertson p.robertson@napier.ac.uk School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, Edinburgh EH11 4BN, UK

vocational and intellectual development of the pupil and stressed the need for all pupils to be known by at least one member of staff. There has been some lack of clarity about what guidance teachers do from these early beginnings, with lists of responsibilities including supporting transition from primary schools, learning support, dealing with non-attendance, personal crisis support, and liaison with parents, external agencies and helping professionals (McLaren, 1999). While CEIAG falls within the scope of the guidance function in schools, it is only one of a number of priorities for guidance teachers.

Careers in the Curriculum

Scottish schools deliver Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, 2024). Within this curriculum design framework, career education is not a separate subject in its own right. Concern has been expressed about its marginalisation in the curriculum (e.g. Allan, 2010, 2015). Guidance teachers are typically responsible for delivering career education in the classroom. This is usually done in lessons labelled as "Personal and Social Education" (PSE). The Curriculum for Excellence area of "health and well-being" tends to dominate the content of PSE lessons, limiting time for career-related activity.

Services Supporting CEIAG in Schools

Careers work in Scottish secondary schools involves collaboration between the school and external agencies, particularly Skills Development Scotland (SDS), and the local Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) partnership.

Scotland's national career service, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), provides career guidance input in schools, prioritising pupils at key decision points, or at risk of unemployment (SDS, 2018). SDS provides both a universal service for all pupils, and a higher level of service for pupils identified as disadvantaged, or at risk of not achieving a "positive destination" on leaving school. This targeted service involves multiple individual contact points.

The role of Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) partnerships is to facilitate education-employer links and to support disadvantaged groups to access them. The partnerships are funded by Scottish Government, but rather than a national service, they are locally hosted by a variety of organisations (including local councils, colleges and chambers of commerce). The label "DYW" derives from Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's youth employment strategy (Scottish Government, 2014a). All secondary schools have a "DYW co-ordinator" who facilitates employer links. They are typically part-time staff. In some cases, this is a teacher directly employed by the school, but more commonly, it is an employee of the DYW host organisation.

In recent years, CEIAG provision has largely been understood through the lens of SDS as Scotland's national careers service, with other perspectives relatively neglected. This study is the first to give primacy to the perspective of teachers.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of the research was to explore the current state of careers provision in secondary schools through the eyes of teachers, with particular reference to five areas: (i) the nature and evolution of the 'guidance teacher' role; (ii) their work with external agencies; (iii) education-employer links; (iv) the impact of the COVID pandemic; (v) the strengths and weaknesses of provision and potential for enhancement.

These areas provided a focus for enquiry. They were chosen to provide an overview of teachers' experience of CEIAG delivery, and their critical evaluation of provision for pupils, whilst also capturing recent changes.

Methods

As this study foregrounds the subjective perspective of teachers, a qualitative methodology was adopted. This section outlines the approach to participant recruitment, the procedure for data generation, the approach to data analysis, and the use of expert informants to enrich that analysis.

Participants

These participants were all in mainstream state schools; special schools and independent schools were excluded from the sample. Teachers were recruited via direct email approaches to schools. The sample came from nine different local authority areas, including both urban and rural settings. This formed the core of the data set. Participants were all experienced teachers (4 + years post-qualification). Seven were in a promoted post, as principal teacher. Four participants described their role as "guidance teacher". Five used the role label "pupil support leader", including some who indicated this was a relatively recent development. One participant was a Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) co-ordinator.

Steps were taken to protect anonymity. Demographic descriptors of participants (e.g. age and gender) are not reported as they have no bearing on the findings. Neither participants nor the school they work for are named in the results. Direct quotations are identified by a participant number (P1–P10).

Procedure

New data were generated in 10 semi-structured interviews with teachers in Scottish state secondary school (five in person; five online). Interviews were typically of 45 minutes duration. The interview schedule identified broad topics for questioning that addressed an overview of careers work in school, located the participants' role and experience as central, and required a critical evaluation of provision. This was piloted in the first interview. Interviews were conducted by author 1 and author 2. They were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data from interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Guest et al. (2012). Coding of data and identification of themes was conducted by author 1 to ensure consistency of approach across the data set. The initial thematic structure was then shared with authors 2 and 3, who critiqued and challenged the analysis to move it from descriptive topic summaries towards interpretive themes. A second iteration of this process was undertaken leading to an agreed structure of high-level themes and their component sub-themes.

Participant teachers were supplied with a brief draft summary of the analysis and invited to comment and correct the researchers' interpretation. They were subsequently provided with a draft of this article and again invited to provide comments and corrections. There were no responses to either approach. This is unsurprising given the pressure of work that participants reported.

Conversations with Expert Informants

The core sample was enhanced by additional four online conversations to contextualise teachers' local understandings with a national perspective provided by five topic experts. Three of these were one-to-one conversations; the final meeting involved two experts in attendance. The experts were affiliated with Education Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, and Developing the Young Workforce partnerships. They were not participants in the study, and these conversations were not treated as part of the data set for analysis. Rather the insights provided by experts informed the analysis. Nonetheless to capture all the information shared, their consent was obtained for

recording and transcription of the interviews. In order to protect anonymity in the reporting of findings, the expert informants are not quoted directly, and their insights are not attributed to an individual or organisation. Their perspectives add to the interpretation of findings by being more current than published literature and give a national overview informed by experience that is not limited to working within one school or local authority area.

Results

The results are organised around three high-level themes: (i) the guidance teacher role; (ii) career as an educational project and (iii) the translation of policy into practice. Each overarching theme is divided into component sub-themes.

Guidance Teacher Role

Primacy of Pastoral Care

Participants reported a wide range of duties in addition to their core teaching function. They were responsible for personal, social, educational, and career guidance. They were also responsible for liaison with external agencies, employers and work experience providers. It was very clear that pastoral care tends to be the highest priority activity, and most demanding of time and attention.

> My bread and butter is the pastoral care … I'll be honest, the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing needs of the kids are first and foremost. P1

> In terms of the time you are putting into the job the vast majority is the pastoral side really. P2

> I would say that careers guidance is a fairly small part in comparison with all of the personal things that I deal with on a day-to-day basis. P6

Participants' job titles were almost evenly split between "guidance teacher" and "pupil support leader". There appears to have been a gradual shift towards the pupil support label, perhaps reflecting the growing emphasis on pastoral work. However, the terms were to some extent interchangeable:

> We are called a number of things. I tend to go back to guidance teacher just because I think people know what that is. We've also been called pastoral. We are the pupils support department which also takes on the learning side of things as well. P10.

Whilst career is generally less of a focus than pastoral support for pupils, it can be more in the foreground for senior phase pupils.

> I do feel we are quite good at keeping that focus [on careers]. Certainly for the ones who are really struggling, they are about to leave in S6 and they still have absolutely no idea P8.

Pastoral activities need to be balanced with teaching duties. Two participants taught unrelated subject areas, but it seems that this practice is becoming less common. Most teachers in the sample taught Personal and Social Education and no other subject. This enabled teaching to integrate with career and pupil support activities.

Evolving Role

The nature of Personal and Social Education (PSE) means that it may be chosen as a curriculum location for new externally-driven educational initiatives, placing additional responsibilities on PSE teachers. For example, national concern about knife crime leads to allocation of this topic to PSE and brings it into the remit of the guidance teacher.

The impact of the COVID pandemic has been particularly salient on the role of the guidance teacher. This is against a backdrop of wider social changes which present challenges to schools, such as the ubiquity of mobile phones and social media. Participants reported increasing

demands for their pastoral care associated with a growth in non-attendance and in the numbers of pupils requiring support for their mental health.

> We are seeing a huge rise in certain issues in our young people, mood, mental health, anxiety, is at an all-time high. School refusing is at an all-time high, those kinds of issues. We are seeing massive spikes and I think obviously relate to COVID in a lot of instances … I think while the pastoral role has always been big, I think it seems to be growing with various issues in society, the need for the guidance teacher seems to be growing. P2

> I think attendance is becoming a real issue post COVID. P4

The proportion of pupils requiring active attention with a guidance teacher's caseload has increased. Resource limitations within primary care and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have aggravated this issue. Teachers of Personal and Social Education are seeking to find ways to provide educational responses to young people's mental health and well-being needs in additional to individual support. As a result, social changes accelerated by COVID have led to growing workloads for guidance teachers and effective ways to manage this have yet to be established.

Pastoral Firefighting

The growth of demands means that priorities compete for space within the guidance teachers' workload, and important pastoral firefighting can grab the available time. Pressing issues may include child protection, self-harm/suicidal thoughts, or matters involving the police.

> As a guidance teacher you have to be, by necessity, reactive to what is going on with the kids and your caseload. You may well put time aside to think, right we are going to develop something, and we are going to make some links. Then that particular day, a young person will come in in crisis and those plans go out of the window … it is often like spinning plates. P2

Being responsive to urgent need makes it hard to set boundaries on the role, or to manage workload. This also means that expectations of a focus on careers work can be downgraded:

> … when I came into guidance … I thought there would be more career stuff. P4

However, some schools are seeking to be systematic about workload management challenges:

> As crazily busy as it is, each remit item, each big responsibility you have in the year, there is target time for that. P2.

Role within a Context

Most schools had adopted a house system or similar vertical structure for the delivery of pupil support. This created caseloads – typically in the region of 200 pupils – for a team of guidance teachers who would work across the whole age spectrum and develop relationships with individual pupils. This structure would tend to require all members of the guidance team to engage with any kind of support need – whether social, personal, educational or career related.

Nonetheless some degree of specialisation was commonplace, with a lead person within the team for specific issues (such as transition from primary school). Arrangements to support university applications were in all cases bar one allocated to an identified lead person, often, but not necessarily, a guidance teacher. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) did not take a lead role in relation to guidance supporting university applications in most schools. This partly reflects the strong targeting of their resources on less academic pupils, but also a desire by schools to own a process whose outcome is important to the status and reputation of the institution.

One guidance teacher may take a lead on both facilitating the work of Skills Development Scotland in the school, and also supporting pupils who are likely to leave school in S4 or S5 and apply to colleges, apprenticeships or employment. This role may include supporting pupils who are disengaged from learning or otherwise at risk of not entering a positive destination on leaving school.

> My job as a kind of counterpoint to that [the UCAS support role] is to make sure that college apprenticeships, modern apprenticeships, graduate apprenticeships, are screamed from the rooftops … P1

Some participants reported engagement from school leadership in guidance activities. In some cases, a depute head teacher had designated responsibility for careers and pastoral functions in the school and took an active role participating in regular planning and pupil tracking meetings. Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) arrangements requires a named person in the school to be responsible for oversight of employer liaison activity and this may often reside at depute level. Nonetheless, school leadership did not feature prominently in the accounts of participants and, in at least some cases, appeared to give minimal attention to the guidance function.

Relationships between guidance teachers and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) staff were overwhelming described in positive terms. They were often part of the team.

> … so we've got a great relationship with our career adviser, she is in and out of our office all the time … So she's been fantastic, she's been a breath of fresh air. P4.

> They're in school four or five days a week [name] is regularly up and down to the department, and we've got a good relationship, I think we work well together … And we've had a range of different career advisers over the years which has been interesting as well, some go above and beyond, some don't, but we're very happy with the people we have got at the moment. P10.

These positive descriptions were characterised in terms of the commitment and contribution of the specific individual career adviser rather than in terms of SDS and its organisation or systems. Behaviours that were viewed as positive by guidance teachers included spending a substantial proportion of the week in school, becoming well known among pupils, sharing information on pupil needs, accepting referrals and following up pupils who were at risk of not entering a positive destination.

There were very few caveats to this positive view. Two participants indicated a wish for improved information sharing with SDS, for example on the outcomes of career guidance interviews with pupils (which may be restricted due to SDS confidentiality protocols).

The view of relationships with Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) co-ordinators was more mixed. This may reflect the diversity of local arrangements underpinning delivery, and the substantial challenges of employer engagement in the COVID recovery period. As with SDS, DYW co-ordinators seemed to be viewed as individuals rather than part of a structure.

> … our Developing the Young Workforce Co-ordinator [name] has been excellent and her predecessor was excellent as well … P10

> The vision is there but we've not really had much success. P4

Guidance teachers were also engaged in liaison to facilitate the work of a variety of other external organisations, including local colleges and third sector providers. Typically, these organisations offered learning experiences to pupils who leave school in S4 and may become disengaged from education. Multiple agencies might be working in one school.

> … much of my job is spent trying to get some young people to come back into school and to co-ordinate projects between external agencies and our provision in school. P6

In addition to describing positive relationships with SDS and DYW workers, participants spoke favourably of the commitment of their colleagues in the guidance team within school, and the support this afforded.

All the local authorities had ceased to employ advisory teachers to support Personal and Social Education (PSE). Some continued to operate peer support groups for guidance teachers, and these were a useful source of information and benchmarking provision. In one instance, the local authority had been paying a small honorarium to a guidance teacher to convene the group, but this arrangement had just been withdrawn.

Career Support for Individuals as Part of the Role

There appears to be some variation in the extent of individual career support work by guidance teachers. In some cases, this is not a substantial part of the role and referral to the Skills Development Scotland career adviser is the default.

> … in terms of one-to-one personalised career education, it's only a small part of our PSE programme … if I was being totally honest, a lot of career advice is you're signposting them to Skills Development Scotland essentially because we've not got the time … P4.

However, in some schools at specific times of year, individual guidance work can be intensive, particularly when it is support provided to all pupils in a cohort in relation to subject choices.

> In terms of starting the careers, the pathway planning and stuff, we obviously meet with the young people after each round of teacher tracking … we look at their pathways, look at what they need, see whether they are on track … P8.

Support for university applications represents another function which can require individual work.

> We sit and help them with their personal statements although that tends to be on a one-to-one basis rather than in PSE lessons. P9.

In some accounts of individual support, participants were describing conversations within the Personal and Social Education (PSE) classroom. It seems that there was no strong distinction in the minds of participants between individual support as opposed to teaching. PSE classes typically consisted of pupils within the guidance teachers' house and caseload. Teachers had established relationships with pupils.

Information Role

An additional dimension to the role of the guidance teacher was engagement with digital provision of career information. There was heavy reliance on the Skills Development Scotland My World of Work web service as the main source of careers information for pupils.

> My World of Work, that's our primary resource. We try and gun everything that were doing to the pupils towards it. You imagine it from a pupil's perspective, they are being saturated with information constantly, particularly living in a digital world socially. We've got to try and streamline where they go for things. P1.

> [My World of Work is] … the centrepiece of the career management units. P3

Other digital sources seemed to have fallen from favour. Few schools were continuing to use PlanitPlus (undated), an online career information resource specifically for young people provided by a consortium of Scottish local authorities. A minority of schools had considered commercially available digital career information resources, but they had been rejected on grounds of costs, or duplicating what My World of Work had to offer, with less adaptation to Scotland.

Schools also managed their own internal digital provision, most often by using Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom as a virtual learning environment. The platform is chosen by the local authority. How this was structured might vary but creating a space for each house and each year group was one common solution.

> … basically our main source of getting information out to the kids is we've got Teams pages; so we have a Team page for each year group … with that they have different channels. So for example, they'll have a PSE channel in there. They'll have a future studies one, they'll have a careers one … P5.

Often these resources were used as an online noticeboard for the sharing of opportunities, such as college open days, or work experience providers. Participants reported challenges in judging how to target this information to the most appropriate groups or individuals. It was often necessary to

reinforce the posting of opportunities through announcements in class or other methods, to get pupils' attention.

> That's through email. So they kind of get a double whammy because sometimes they don't always check Teams. They're not always great at doing that. P5.

Training for the Role

The level of training that guidance teachers reported receiving was low relative to the challenging nature of the role.

> I'm not trained as guidance teacher. As far as I'm aware you can't go to university and train as a guidance teacher. P5.

> Not really no, I mean we've had some in service training through school and the authority, we've had various bits and pieces, more specific to some things, so in the earlier days we had drug and alcohol training because they felt that's what we needed to know about. Not so much careers … P10.

> Maybe [we need] more training around leading careers in classes, so as part of the PSE curriculum … We use My World of Work and we have training on that, but is that still the best process for us now? P7.

Only one participant reported receiving any training input relevant to the guidance role in their initial teacher education, and this was more than 20 years previously.

Career as an Educational Project

Factors Limiting Coherence

In general, there was little sense of careers work as an integrated, coherent educational project led by teachers. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, when asked about the career education curriculum, several participants responded in terms of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) providing the input to the classroom.

> And obviously we cover some career education as well and we deliver careers education alongside our Skills Development Scotland, our career adviser. P4.

> … we start in first year in collaboration with the SDS adviser. So in PSE class, for example, an SDS adviser would come in to introduce their role in school and then we would … register each year group onto the My World of Work website. P6.

The SDS web service My World of Work shapes classroom activity.

> We predominantly use My World of Work as a guide … My World of Work is probably the format that we use for a lot of our career planning stuff. P7.

Secondly, career education is primarily located within the subject area known as Personal and Social Education (PSE), The classroom time available to PSE, typically one period per week, encompasses a range of other topics, including support for transition from primary school, health/mental well-being, sex and relationships, and drugs.

Thirdly, teaching styles are not necessarily didactic in style or pre-programmed in content; they can be more adaptive to needs.

> In terms of the careers lessons in PSE they tend to vary depending on who is in the class. It doesn't tend to be too much of a teach the whole class at once sort of thing. It depends on the pathways that the young people are aiming for. It does tend to be do it in little groups kind of thing … P8.

Fourthly, Personal and Social Education is not provided in all schools into S5 and S6. Arrangements may be more ad hoc and driven by the contingencies of higher education applications, which are often handed by staff who are not in the guidance team.

Fifthly, several participants described a differentiated programme of study for S4 pupils who were leaving at Christmas, disengaged from school, or not expected to perform well academically. Pupils who were sitting National 5 examinations in the summer would have study leave between Easter and June. But those not entered for these qualifications would have no reason to be on study leave and no purposeful timetable. Guidance teachers were working with multiple external organisations to put these arrangements in place for individuals or small groups.

> … we have a big list of people we link in with to help get our kids onto the positive destination route. P5.

Sixth and finally, whilst career education is primarily located within Personal and Social Education, some participants expressed the view that it should ideally be across the whole curriculum.

> … its embedded within the school so faculty to faculty should be embedding their own career education within their own faculties P4.

Here, the distinction between career education and work-related experiences to enrich other subject areas became unclear. Some participants expressed a positive view of cross-curricular working whilst also acknowledging that they were not always kept informed of what was happening across the school.

Outcomes of Career Learning

Most participants' accounts focused on topics rather than the outcomes of career learning. To the extent that outcomes were discussed, they included career management skills, as conceptualised by Skills Development Scotland (2012). The skills for making applications to jobs, college or to universities were among these skills, as they facilitate a successful transition from school. Post-application follow-through and support with transitions were not mentioned.

Personal and Social Education (PSE) in general, and career education topics in particular, are not assessed. However, a minority of schools were making use of accreditation for education-employer links. This most often took the form of an accredited personal development and work unit (SQA National 5).

Whilst there was not a sharp focus on learning outcomes within the PSE curriculum, several participants were clear about the importance of positive destinations as an ultimate outcome for their work, and a source of pride if successful.

> I suppose we are just mindful of the sole purpose of the school is positive destinations in a sense. It is something on our radar right from first year in terms of career management skills and trying to imbue that in the pupils … There is a huge framework and structure in the school devoted to that. It technically isn't written in as a policy. P2.

> … I would say as a school we do relatively well, because we get relatively good results, and we've got just under 50% of students going on to university … our positive destinations last year are about 96, 97%. P9.

The discourse of "positive destinations" originates in the Scottish Government policy initiatives which aim to mitigate the scale of youth unemployment, and this focus in turn drives the priorities and language of Skills Development Scotland. Paradoxically, positive destinations are defined negatively – as the avoidance of an extended period not in education, employment or training (NEET). This is deemed positive, irrespective of its sustainability, the appropriateness of the destination to the individual, or the quality of the career decision process leading to the outcome. Positive destinations seem to be unquestioned as a target outcome for career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in school, and no alternative high-level educational objectives are available.

Fall and Rise of Employer Engagement

Employer engagement was extensively disrupted by the COVID pandemic, with most activities ceasing altogether. The relationships between schools and employers diminished during this period, and some participants spoke in terms of rebuilding from a low base.

> But it broke a lot of the momentum of things that just happened, have stopped happening … P3.

> Our work experience hasn't been very great recently … We used to have all of 4th year going out at the same time. We don't seem to have that running at the moment. P5.

> This is the first year we are running work experience again since COVID … The problem post COVID is that the database has eroded away to virtually nothing. P2.

> … . in post-COVID land, very difficult to try and get employers to agree to that all at the same time. Then they've got scheduling issues of trying do that around every school within the council. P1.

> … I would say we're still on that rebuilding and post-COVID phase … P9.

Even where the work experience offer was limited, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) co-ordinators were successfully supporting schools to implement other kinds of employer links, including visiting speakers, and industrial visits.

Translation of Policy into Practice

Policy and Curriculum Guidelines

Level of awareness of the education and employment policy landscape in the sample were limited. This is unsurprising given the complexity of the landscape, the time pressures that teachers work under, and the limited direct influence on their work of some government documents. Some participants recognised the names of key policy publications when prompted; but could not recall their key messages. They described interacting with these documents in two ways: reading them when they first came into school; and using them when provision was being reviewed or redesigned. Other participants recognised no policy documents even when prompted.

The most recognised document was the Education Scotland (2015a) Developing the Young Workforce: Career Education Standard (3–18). In some cases, this may have influenced curriculum design. This makes sense as it is the document with the most practical implications for provision in school. However, very few in the sample were aware of the existence of equivalent benchmarks for work experience (Education Scotland, 2015b).

For one participant, the How good is our school? report represented a key reference point.

> We had a recent inspection … . so the summary of that inspection will dictate the school improvement plan going forward. P3.

The inspection framework used to generate this report is described in Education Scotland (2015d).

External Agencies as Shapers of Policy Influence

Some participants relied on external partners to interpret policy expectations and national guidelines for them.

> So, I've not sat down and internalised these things, but I rely upon the relationships that I've got with SDS and the DYW co-ordinator to keep me right with such things … I don't make decisions in isolation in a bubble. We're very much about collaboration and co-operative teamwork … If we had all the time in the world to sit and pour through and pick through, but we're in a place of recovery as much as we are in development. P1.

> … what you tend to find is SDS will take a lot of lead in terms of some of these because that is their bread and butter … P3.

This suggests that key agencies have a mediating role in the translation of policy to institutional practice.

Needs Identification

The identification of pupils' needs is a key activity in translating the government priority to ensure positive destinations on leaving school into actions which reach individual pupils. For the most part this is driven by the systems operated by Skills Development Scotland (SDS), although other agencies are also prioritising similar groups of pupils. SDS receive data from the local authority on

the pupils attending each school. From this data set, potential individuals are identified who may require more support. Key indicators include whether a pupil is "care experienced", has additional support needs (ASN), or lives in an area of socio-economic disadvantage as defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, (SIMD). SDS career advisers to the school then meet with the guidance teacher team to integrate their knowledge of pupils' needs with this data. From this SDS undertake a triage-style classification of pupils needs into minimum, medium and maximum levels, and allocate their staff resources accordingly. Those identified as maximum get access to five meetings with their career advisers:

> So, you know, what we would class as my high tariff pupils, the ones that are going to need quite a lot of attention, he knows them almost as well – or even better – than I do, because he's quite happy to repeat appointments. P6

Those identified as minimum receive relatively less individual attention from Skills Development Scotland. Several guidance teachers in the sample saw tracking of pupils as an important part of their role. In some cases, this was facilitated by the use of surveys of pupils' intentions regarding intentions to leave school, and choice of study programmes. Understanding that pupils' intentions evolve over time, these exercises were repeated. Another function (sometimes used in combination with surveys) was tracking meetings, involving the guidance team, SDS career advisers, and sometimes the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) co-ordinator and a member of the school leadership team. At these meetings pupil needs were reviewed, and pupils requiring additional support were identified. Pupils likely to disengage from school, or to leave without a career plan were a particular focus. Some guidance teachers saw this tracking activity as a strength of their provision, and critical to the achievement of a high rate of positive destinations.

> … we track all of our pupils in terms of their destination planning. We get them to do online surveys and identify when they are planning to leave or when they think they are going to leave, obviously it is very fluid … the guidance team are great, they really know the pupils on their caseload through chatting to them in PSE … I suppose what is good I think is our knowledge of what the kids want to do. Whether it is through the online survey and the data we collect. Again, as I say, the guidance team are phenomenal at getting to know the kids really well. P2.

> I feel like the tracking of the young people and helping them know what possible pathways are open to them I think we do well … we have become very adept at making sure they know all the options available to them. P8.

Discussion

Guidance Teacher Role

The agreement on teacher terms and conditions following the McCrone Report (Scottish Executive Education Department, SEED, 2001) had the effect of reducing the numbers of guidance teachers and the clarity of the role. In the twenty-first century, there has been divergence between schools in how they organise this function, and in the role label, with common variants including "personal support", "pupil support" and "pastoral support" (Wallace, 2018).

Career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) competes with teaching assessed subjects, and with the pastoral care function which was strengthened by and Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Scottish Government, 2014b) and Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Government, 2017). Most recently, the COVID pandemic has required schools to prioritise pupil mental health. This is evident in a recent thematic inspection report:

> Almost all establishments are providing increased levels of support to improve the mental and emotional wellbeing of children, young people and their families. Schools recognise that for many children and young people the pandemic has resulted in lower levels of confidence and higher levels of anxiety. Across a significant number of establishments, children and young people have less belief in their own capacity to do well. This is having an effect on their confidence and motivation. As a result, they are more inclined to ask for help and support from staff. (Education Scotland, 2022, p. 5).

Howieson and Semple (2000) explored the guidance teacher function through the eyes of pupils, and identified some potential for role conflict. Pupils were not necessarily comfortable accepting non-judgemental person-centred support from staff who were also engaged in managing discipline and attendance. In a similar study, Boyd and Lawson (2004) found that pupils perceived a need for guidance but felt that only some teachers had a suitable personality for this supportive role.

There is no consistent terminology or agreed job description for the role. It seems there is also no history of substantive training for the guidance teacher role. Previous (pre McCrone) structures for supporting guidance teachers to learn on the job have been discontinued. As a result, the only training is continuous professional development (CPD), which is limited in scale. Some participants had experienced one day off-the-job training, but the prioritised topics tended to be personal/pastoral concerns such as pupil well-being, rather than careers work. This lack of training makes Scotland an outlier: other European nations with equivalent school-based guidance counsellor models – such as Ireland, Sweden and Finland – require a high level of specialist training and a postgraduate qualification (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Hooley, 2022).

Skills Development Scotland has an education team which provides career education related CPD. This is typically on request from the school and agreed as part of the partnership agreement. It is normally delivered as a one-hour package during an in-service training day and adapted as appropriate to the context of delivery.

In the absence of a national framework for probationer/early career teachers, some local authorities were operating local arrangements. Skills Development Scotland in partnership with Education Scotland was seeking to access these meetings with limited success to date. Pastoral and career matters are not requirements to address in the probationary period.

The evidence in this project suggests that pastoral care demands on guidance teachers have expanded to a level that partially undermines their ability to deliver CEIAG provision. At the same time the support structures for guidance teachers have eroded.

Career as an Educational Project

Career education competes for space in the curriculum, particularly in the crowded final year of compulsory schooling. It is not assessed and accredited, and therefore risks becoming a "Cinderella" subject (Allan, 2015). It is not a subject in its own right, being subsumed within Personal and Social Education (PSE), which also covers diverse topics such as sex and relationship education, personal safety, drugs, and mental well-being. This is evident in the Education Scotland (2018) thematic review of PSE/health and well-being in schools, which gives minimal attention to career education. Education Scotland's (2015a) benchmark statement outlines expectations for the career education curriculum, but there is anecdotal evidence of poor compliance. Education Scotland's (2017) review of the implementation indicates some good practice, but patchy adherence to this benchmark standard. These arrangements are in contrast to most Nordic countries, which identify career education as a statutory entitlement for school pupils (Einarsdottir et al., 2023).

The extent to which career education should be embedded across the curriculum is a long running debate. This is evident in Allan (2010), who also asked "who's minding the store?" – i.e. questioning who is taking responsibility for ensuring effective career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in Scottish schools.

The evidence in this study is consistent with this understanding. It was clear that teaching staff find it difficult to articulate a strong sense of career development as a holistic educational project. This is evident in their descriptions of the career-related curriculum, which consisted mostly of practicalities around external agency input. They described being responsive to needs and demands from pupils and partner agencies, but they did not describe planning or leading an integrated programme of activities across year groups and across the curriculum.

Based on data from a sample of staff across Scotland involved in Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) delivery, a review by the Scottish Government (2023a) found a scattered landscape of

provision across different local authorities and different schools. There were local variations in how DYW activities are embedded into the curriculum, staff capacity, and the support (or lack of) from school leadership team, partner organisations and employers. Despite this DYW was felt by most of those surveyed to increase the number of disadvantaged young people moving into and sustaining a positive destination after leaving school. Engagement with employers and work simulations in schools were seen to expose young people to different types of learning. DYW was also seen by staff to be effective at building awareness of inequality and inclusion issues in school.

In a parallel review of the impact of DYW on employer engagement (Scottish Government, 2023b) – there was acknowledgement of the need for long-term funding to develop more strategic and impactful approaches, the introduction of a national marketing campaign to promote DYW more effectively and a core nationwide service offer (with local targeted flexibility). Closer integration of services between Skills Development Scotland and DYW staff to avoid duplication of effort was also recommended.

Translating Policy into Practice

National initiatives have had some bearing on career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), notably Scottish Government (2014a). These initiatives seek to mitigate youth unemployment, to strengthen skills, and to promote effective education-industry collaboration. Two specific policy documents directly address CEIAG (Scottish Government, 2011, 2020). Most recently the COVID pandemic has impacted on transitions from school. The youth labour market was affected (SDS, 2021), requiring state intervention in the form of the "Youth Guarantee" (Begbie, 2020). CEIAG serves to support this additional investment in post-school learning opportunities, by facilitating the flow of school leavers into training or further and higher education opportunities. More recently, the "Career Review" (SDS, 2022) pointed to a need for improvement in career and work-related education in schools but offered no detail on how to progress this.

Teachers represent the critical group who determine how policy will translate into practice in schools. Through the lens of Hooley and Godden's (2022) model of policymaking and implementation they could be described as "street level" actors. The evidence in this study suggests that guidance teachers are not well placed to absorb the nuances of a complex landscape of policies and national initiatives. Most of the detail is lost in translation. The information guidance teachers receive is to some extent mediated by external agencies to the school. Nonetheless, some broad concerns of the Scottish Government, such as the need for additional support for vulnerable groups and the need to mitigate youth unemployment, are faithfully represented in action on the ground.

Following the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Review of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (OECD, 2021), the Scottish Government has commissioned and published its own independent reviews (2022, 2023c, 2023d). These indicate a need for substantive changes in the school curriculum and assessment, in educational agencies, and in the skills landscape, including the institutional arrangements for the national careers service. As a result, there may be significant change in the education and skills policy in the coming years, which may impact on the work of guidance teachers.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

These findings reported in this paper are based on a small-scale qualitative study. No claims are made that the sample is representative or that the findings generalise to the experience of a wider population of guidance teachers in Scotland. Rather the information provided enables the reader to assess the extent to which the findings presented are transferable to their own context

or setting of concern. Some messages emerge clearly from our participants' voices, when analysed through the lens of the published literature and the observations of expert informants.

Guidance teachers undertake a wide and complex role, and careers work represents one among several priorities. This is nothing new. However, growing pupil mental health issues and non-attendance means that demands on guidance teachers have grown in recent years, making it harder to manage role boundaries and workload. This leaves less time and energy for careers work. Where there are competing demands, pastoral firefighting takes precedence. Both in the classroom and in individual support, careers work is locked in a competition that it cannot win against more pressing priorities. At the same time, arrangements for work experience and employer liaison deteriorated during the COVID pandemic and are requiring effort to rebuild.

Careers work in Scottish schools is pervaded by a government priority to contain the level of youth unemployment, and shows a strong focus on "positive destinations'. This promotes a functional pragmatism to ensure pupils are "on track" and to intervene if they are not. The quality, appropriateness or sustainability of positive destinations is less salient concerns. Teaching staff do not appear to have broader educational objectives for career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to underpin an integrated curriculum design and to inform the leadership of a whole school approach to developing the pupils' experience of work and career.

The lack of substantive training to support guidance teachers is striking. It is therefore unsurprising that they do not have a deep understanding of career education, or of the nature of career counselling. They have other strengths – such as knowledge of pupil needs, and positive relations with external agencies – which partially compensate. They are focused on practical contingences and coping, rather than driving forward an educational vision for career development.

Recommendations

- Guidance teachers in Scotland require substantive training for their challenging and multi-faceted role. Ideally, this training should be accredited, available on entry to the role, and followed up with ongoing access to support networks outside of the school.
- The growth of pastoral demands means that the careers work function needs some protection, and a case could be made for its separation from pastoral care. Doing this effectively requires national guidelines on the remit and boundaries of the role.
- Given the time pressure they face, guidance teachers cannot realistically use multiple policy documents to guide their practice. A single point of reference or handbook tailored for their needs is required, outlining minimum standards and best practice for careers work.
- A holistic conception of career as an educational project is required in schools to ensure that provision is managed, integrated and purposeful, as opposed to being reactive to the agenda of external agencies.

Data availability

A data management plan for the project was approved and is in accordance with Edinburgh Napier University Data Management Policy. Reasonable requests to access the anonymised interview transcriptions of ten interviews with guidance teachers will be considered and approved. Data from 5 expert interviews will not be shared as individuals and organisations are identifiable. Requests should be made to the corresponding author.

Disclosure statement

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Ethical approvals

The project was subject to scrutiny and approval by the Edinburgh Napier University School of Applied Sciences Ethics and Research Integrity Committee. Participants gave informed consent to participate and for publication. Verbal briefing and agreements were supported by a written participant information sheet and a signed consent form prior to data collection. To protect anonymity, where directly quoted, participants are given a number, and neither schools nor local authorities are identified. Care has been taken to ensure the quotations provided reflect the nature of the participants' perspectives. Reasonable requests to share the data set will be considered.

Notes on contributors

Peter J. Robertson Professor Pete Robertson is a qualified and experienced career development professional. He is a lecturer in career guidance in the School of Applied Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University. He is the President of the Career Development Institute (CDI) and a Fellow of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC). His research interests include career theory and policy, and employment support for disadvantaged groups.

Susan Meldrum is a qualified career development professional, with practice experience in a variety of settings. She is programme leader for the Postgraduate Diploma in Career Guidance and Development in the School of Applied Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research interests include the use of group work in career development. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA) and a Career Development Institute Registered Career Development Professional (RCDP).

Heather Earnshaw is a qualified physics teacher. She is an educationalist with experience of both school and higher education settings. She is a lecturer on the Postgraduate Diploma in Education in the School of Applied Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University.

ORCID

Peter J. Robertson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2152-4618
Susan Meldrum http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5643-1681
Heather Earnshaw http://orcid.org/0009-0002-7308-6549

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