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## Setting the Bar High: Danish Youth Education Counselors and National School-Completion Goals

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### Abstract

European countries are striving to increase secondary school completion rates as part of their labor market planning. Denmark has taken an approach that places youth education guidance counselors at the center of their efforts. Based on interviews with 25 counselors and 10 other education leaders, this article explores the role and practice of these Danish counselors in regard to meeting state education goals. While the counselors strongly support the country's high educational goal, they have concerns about its attainability, its across-the-board application, and coercive, or 'individual-blaming' elements of its implementation. Countries wishing to adopt this model should consider the fit between counseling philosophy and policy so as to avoid role conflict.

Key words: Denmark; educational counseling; education goals; secondary school completion; role conflict

## **Introduction**

Over the last twenty years, European countries have faced challenges from globalization, the economic recession, and demographic shifts. In 2000, the European Commission (EC) developed the “Lisbon Strategy” to grow and expand job opportunities in the new millennium (Rodriguez, Warmerdam, & Triomphe, 2010). By 2010, however, it was clear that not all of the goals set out in this strategy could be met; in part because of the unexpected economic recession. As a result, in 2010, the EC revisited the Lisbon Strategy and updated it. The new Europe 2020 Strategy prioritized the creation of jobs in a technological global market. It also set two key education goals for member nations: achieve an upper secondary school completion rate of 90 percent, and a tertiary education completion rate of 40 percent (European Commission, 2010).

The 90 percent secondary completion goal is ambitious, given that the EU 21-country average was 85 percent in 2009 (OECD, 2011, p. 55). European leaders believe this goal is important, however, because they see education as key to the creation of high-paying and innovation-producing scientific and technological jobs. Such jobs, the thinking goes, will allow citizens to compete in a global market, increase the tax base, and help people pull themselves out of the recession. Education can also serve as a way to produce more qualified workers while delaying the entry of youth into the labor force. Approximately 20.9 percent of European Union youth under the age of 25 and not at school were unemployed in 2011—more than twice the general unemployment rate (Eurostat, 2011, p. 1). Among those no longer in school, youth who have completed degrees find jobs at a higher rate than those who have not (Eurostat, 2013).

Once Europe set increased school completion as a key goal, the question became (and remains) how best to attain it. There are a number of possible routes. For example, governments can provide incentives to individuals to remain in school or they can make schools more attractive or less expensive. They can choose to follow Finland’s example and increase teacher education and training to ensure school quality (Hancock, 2011). Another option would be to sanction youth who do not complete an education.

This article examines how one country—Denmark—has chosen to approach the school completion goal. Over the years, the Danish government has taken a multi-faceted approach to increasing the number of young people who attain a secondary education, but one of the most notable and unique parts of their campaign has been the heavy focus on the role of the youth educational guidance counselor. These counselors are paid through public monies and are based in the primary schools where they work with all the students in grades eight and nine (ages 14-16). They are also responsible for providing educational guidance to young people over the age of 15 who are not in school or work.

This article discusses the history of guidance counseling in Denmark and describes the shape and context of the youth educational counselors' current responsibilities. Based on interviews with 25 counselors, the study explores how they feel about the stated educational goal and their role in achieving it. Specifically, the research questions asked were: "What happens when the state becomes a major stakeholder defining educational goals for counselors to meet?" "Can the state and counselors work together to achieve larger labor goals?" and "What happens when government policy conflicts with other stakeholder demands or counseling principles?" To begin to answer these questions, the next section brings together two literatures: that on stakeholders in counseling (with a focus on the state) and that on role conflict.

### **Policy, Stakeholders, and Role Conflict:**

There is a small but growing literature on public policy and its impact on guidance counseling. Researchers have explored how and why national and local governments become stakeholders. Watts and Sultana (2004), for example, comment that governments involve themselves because counseling is viewed as a "public good, linked to policy goals related to learning, the labor market, and social equity" (p. 105). At the same time, researchers have found wide international variation in the shape and magnitude of government influence (Watts, 2008; Watts & Sultana, 2004). In general, governments play four roles: a legislative one (enabling

or requiring the creation and maintenance of guidance counseling systems), a remunerative one (determining and providing finances), an exhortative one (producing guidelines or encouraging certain counseling practices through addresses or memos), and a regulative one (mandating certain counseling practices or requiring counselors to have particular credentials) (Watts, 2008). As is described in the sections that follow, Denmark's government has assumed a particularly active role in all four spheres of policy making, taking on a significant stakeholder role.

It is important to identify the stakeholders in various occupations because they shape the demands placed on frontline workers. Interestingly, while we know that government plays a stakeholder role for counselors, we do not know much about how the counselors respond to government mandates. There is, however, research on similar types of occupations. Søren Winter (2003), for example, conducted a study with Danish immigration welfare workers and agri-business regulators. Based in part on the work of Downs (1967), Wilson (1980), and Brehm and Gates (1999), he posited that front line workers' response to government policy depends largely on three factors: their own feelings about the policy, their attitudes toward the tools they have to carry out the policy, and their feelings toward their clients. When workers favor a policy and feel the tools at their disposal are appropriate, they are more likely to follow regulations. Holding adverse feelings toward their clients also leads them to be more likely to uphold regulations, especially punitive ones. Winter's work supported these hypotheses and he found that, when resistance occurs, it is likely to be in areas that are less visible to policymakers. For example, workers might continue to keep the numbers of clients they serve high (a visible, measurable outcome) while resisting a change to the way they interact with their clients (which is invisible to policymakers).

Government is an important stakeholder in counseling but it is far from the only one. Counselors must also respond to the demands and expectations of administrators, teachers, parents, trade unions, clients, and the public at large (Wilkerson, 2009; Watts, 2008). This multiplicity of stakeholders opens the possibility for role conflict. Role conflict "occurs when two or more simultaneous

and incompatible pressures exist in such a way that compliance with one role compromises fulfilling others” (Butler & Constantine, 2005, p. 57). These conflicting pressures can come from two different stakeholders (for example, the administration wanting counselors to work more efficiently and parents wanting their children to receive more attention). Conflict can also involve a mismatch between a worker’s expectation for his or her job and the official demands (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). This latter element of role conflict is sometimes referred to as role incongruity (Wilkerson, 2009). Prison guards and social workers are classic examples of occupations in which role conflict occurs because they are positioned as both helpers and disciplinarians (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Lipsky, 1980).

Research suggests that role conflict is problematic because it can lead workers to quit their jobs, become burnt out, or cope by resisting particular policies (Lipsky, 1980). At least two studies of American guidance counselors found that such conflict exists and varies across levels of counseling (elementary, middle, high school) (Coll & Freeman, 1997; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). Using a survey methodology, these studies found evidence of conflicting demands from administrators and clients as well as a mismatch between the counselors’ vision of their job and reality. These two studies, and others, found that role conflict can lead to burnout among counselors (Butler & Constantine, 2005; Wilkerson, 2009).

### **The Danish Context:**

In 1993, the Danish national government set a target for 2015 of 95 percent completion of “youth education” (OECD, 2002). Youth education in this context refers to a number of different types of upper secondary school for students who have completed grade nine (at the age of 15 or 16). Some youth educations are academic (the “gymnasium,” the equivalent to an academic high school), others are technical/vocational, and some programs combine the two. The Danish government decides which programs count as a “youth education” and which do not. Gymnasium

is three years long, and most vocational programs are between three-and-a-half and four years. By 1995, the Danish youth education completion rate was about 80 percent. After that, the rate increased, achieving a high of 93 percent in 2002 and then decreasing to 85 percent in 2009 (OECD, 2011, p. 55). Over the entire period, however, Denmark achieved an average annual growth rate of 0.5 percent (p. 55)<sup>1</sup>. About 97 percent of Danish young people begin secondary school education, but about 10 percent end up dropping out, with these drop-outs being disproportionately from technical/vocational schools (ICF GHK Consulting, 2013, p. 3).

Denmark supports the Europe 2020 Strategy, but has chosen to retain a higher secondary school completion rate goal (95 as opposed to 90 percent). This higher goal makes sense for many reasons. Firstly, Denmark is already ahead of many other EU countries in completion rates (OECD, 2011, p. 44). Secondly, Denmark has a history of free and voluntary education that is consistent with a high completion goal. Nikolaj Grundtvig, the educator, philosopher, and pastor, played a key role in Danish history and shaped the society's understanding of education (Jenkins, 2011). Grundtvig founded the "folk high school," a place of voluntary, self-directed learning that combined academics with hands-on skills training. Folk high schools continue to exist today in Denmark and the idea of the importance of education remains strong (Jenkins, 2011). Education in Denmark is free and students over the age of 18 receive a stipend for their living expenses when they are enrolled. It is clear that Danes believe that education is central to citizenship and to the optimal development of individuals.

Denmark is also particularly committed to setting high educational goals because of the economic and social realities it faces. It is a welfare state, providing a wide range of benefits to its citizens. The benefits, of course, require a strong tax base with a lot of young workers. Denmark currently has a fairly low birth rate and a

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<sup>1</sup> Danish completion rates are based on projections from current data. The completion rate for 2009, for example, is a projection for students completing compulsory school (9<sup>th</sup> grade) in 2009. The projection for 2011 is 92% (Henricksen, 2012)

high average life expectancy, resulting in a low ratio of workers to retirees (Statistics Denmark, 2013). The country has a thriving manufacturing sector, which is concentrated in areas of high technology. These businesses produce some completed goods but also high-tech parts that go into products assembled elsewhere. Denmark's high relative wages make it unattractive for companies in need of low-skilled manufacturing or assembly (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006). Additionally, the lack of oil and gas resources means that Danes cannot count on natural resource extraction as a source of income or employment. All of these factors lead Denmark to emphasize education—with the goal of placing as many workers as possible in high-paying jobs in technology and science fields. Because these fields are constantly changing, school leavers need a broad and extensive education that gives them the skills to be flexible workers (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006).

### **The Danish Youth Guidance Counselor Role**

The Danish government has developed a number of approaches to increase education levels in the country but much of their strategy involves the work of youth educational guidance counselors. Guidance counseling for young people has a long history in Denmark. Many schools started employing informal guidance counseling decades ago. At that time, guidance counseling was not a separate profession but rather an extension of the teaching role. Interested teachers elected to be guidance counselors and were released from full-time teaching. All still taught, but with fewer classes, and they were expected to engage in counseling during their non-teaching periods. Guidance counselors focused on educational issues but they also provided counseling about any personal or social issues they saw as impeding a young person's educational progress. There was no required course of training and counselors correspondingly engaged in a wide range of counseling methods (Plant and Thomsen, 2012). The government did not play a major role in regulating guidance counseling.

The Danish government took on a much more active role in 2003 with the passage of the Act on Guidance in Relation to Choice of Education, Training and

Career. This Act called for the creation of an independent counseling organization staffed by full-time guidance counselors (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2004, under the direction of the Ministry of Education, the Ungdommens Uddannelsesvejledning (UU) (translated as “Youth Education Guidance”) was launched. It hires, supervises, and provides on-going training for many of the guidance counselors in the country. As was true in the previous period, most counselors are physically located in schools, but instead of reporting to the head of the school, they report to the UU. The Act required that all counselors hold one of three kinds of post-secondary school degrees in counseling (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). It should be noted that UU counselors are not the only educational guidance counselors in the country. Secondary schools still have their own counselors as do some primary private schools. Adults can receive some limited educational counseling through trade unions, job centers (which generally concentrate on career, not educational, counseling), and adult continuing education centers (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). UU counselors, however, make up a significant percentage of the educational counselors in the country and are the only ones directed to serve youth who are not in school.

In addition to launching the UU, the 2003 Guidance Act also contained other important provisions that have had an impact on guidance counselor work. First, the Act specified that counseling services were no longer voluntary. This significant change in philosophy required counselors to make contact with young people who are not in school to offer them guidance services (Watts & Sultana, 2004). This contact is generally in-person but sometimes when a youth refuses to come in, the contact is by phone or letter. When all of these methods are ineffective, counselors are required to make a home visit (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). Second, the 2003 Act mandated that all fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds create an educational plan. Guidance counselors consult with each of the students and help them with their plan. Sometimes family members and teachers also participate in this process and parents are required to sign the completed plan (Sultana, 2004). These plans specify the type of education youth intend to pursue after they finish their compulsory ninth school year. Educational plans are fairly wide-ranging and can include a

youth's goals for work, volunteering, and even leisure-time activities.

In recent years, the 95 percent goal has spurred a number of other policy and legislative changes that affect guidance counseling. Since 2009, the national government of Denmark has passed three separate sets of legislation targeting youth between the ages of 15 and 25. Officially known as the "Youth Packages I, II, and III" (Ungdomspakke I, II, III), these bills are primarily intended to stem youth unemployment by allocating money for internships/apprenticeships, training, and job placement services. In addition, the Youth Package II explicitly stated that youth have a duty to be in education or employment. This was a significant change for Denmark and marked it as different from other Scandinavian countries like Norway where education is viewed as a "right" rather than an obligation (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). Incentive and punishment structures were correspondingly set up to encourage participation in school or work (for example, the length of eligibility for welfare benefits for young unemployed people was shortened) (Plant & Thomsen, 2012).

Prior to the Youth Packages, guidance counselors in primary schools worked with youth from grade six (ages 12 and 13) through to their completion of secondary school, although services were available to youth up to age 25 in some circumstances. Counseling services were offered to all, but young people could choose whether or not to take advantage of them. The Youth Packages changed the years of service as well as the nature of service. Counselors begin working with youth in a formal way in grade eight (ages 14 and 15) and continue with them until they turn 25. Importantly, however, there has been some variation in the UU target population over time, with the government in recent years directing counselors to concentrate on youth who have dropped out, or who are struggling academically and are at risk of dropping out (Ministry of Education, 2004). This decision was made in order to boost the country's school completion rate. Counselors generally have very little or no contact with older youth who remain engaged in education, or who are employed. They do, however, maintain at least minimal contact with all younger youth; especially those in grades eight and nine (ages 14 to 16). They also, as they have done in the past, design and implement classroom presentations about

career options and career planning. Similarly, they continue to provide counseling about personal and social issues that affect a young person's ability to remain in education (Sultana, 2004).

A key element of guidance responsibilities now occurs when young people in their caseload reach grade nine. At that time, counselors conduct an individual evaluation that contains a recommendation for a particular educational path. Counselors are directed to base their recommendation on academic as well as personal and social factors. Personal factors can include such things as motivation, timeliness, responsibility, and the student's own desires. Social factors reflect the youth's ability to get along with others and to behave in a socially acceptable manner. The evaluations are not simply recommendations—until they reach the age of 18, youth can apply only to the types of schools counselors specify as appropriate for them. In the case where a counselor and a youth disagree about the best path, the youth can appeal the counselor's decision to the school. The goal behind both the educational planning and evaluation provisions of the 2003 Act and later Youth Packages is to help teenagers enrol at schools that match their interests and abilities, thereby reducing drop out (Sultana, 2004; Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior, 2012).

In cases where a youth decides to drop out, Danish guidance counselors are again given a central role in encouraging the student to re-enrol. The Youth Packages specify that a counselor must contact, within five days, any individual between the ages of 15 and 17 who drops out of school. These youth and their families are asked to attend a meeting with the guidance counselor to create or modify the youth's educational plan. Once an agreement has been reached, the youth, the counselor, and the family sign the educational plan to signify their commitment. Over time, the guidance counselor monitors the student's progress. If the youth (or the family) fails to uphold any part of the contract, they are asked to meet with the counselor. At this meeting, the parties discuss why the obligations specified in the educational plan are not being met. The counselor seeks to provide any support the youth or family might need to get back on track. If necessary, the agreement can be modified. In extreme circumstances, for example when the youth

refuses to meet with the counselor or refuses to take steps to resume an education or obtain a job, the municipality has the power to withdraw the state stipend given to the youth's family (the "child benefit") (Duell & Vogler-Ludwig, 2011). Families with children over the age of 18 are not eligible for a child benefit but young persons themselves can be sanctioned for non-compliance by the denial of other types of state benefits.

Today the Danish state exerts a particularly strong role in all four domains of guidance counselor public policy making. In fact, Watts (2008) points out that Denmark is notable in that the state takes a strong legislative role in all levels of counseling in the country (across various institutions, from children to adults, in school and out). While the UU is an "independent" body, in truth they are deeply tied to the legislature (Plant & Thomsen, 2012).

### **Methods of the Study**

The data upon which this article is based are pulled from a larger project looking at the changing role of guidance counseling in Danish society. The author initially met with one guidance counselor and two counselor supervisors, allowing her to gain an understanding of the system and identify key issues. These staff members later helped with the development of the general research questions as well as the specific interview questions—although the latter questions changed slightly over the course of the project. The author then attended the monthly meeting of UU Copenhagen to introduce the study to the counselors and let them know that they would soon receive an email soliciting their participation. While not all the counselors in the area were present, the majority of the approximately 90 full-time and 20 part-time counselors were there. Several days after the meeting, one of the counselor supervisors sent out an email and provided a link to sign up for an interview. The author was the only person able to access the sign-up sheet so the supervisors did not know who was volunteering.

The sign-up process—combined with some snowball sampling-- ultimately yielded twenty-five interviews. A voluntary sample can be problematic, as it is likely that people who are most or least passionate about a subject will sign up. It is not

possible to assess the exact degree to which this happened in this study but some of the interviews happened by chance—as, for example, when one interview was completed and the interviewee introduced a co-worker. This helped to ensure a more representative sample than just counselors who were motivated to volunteer. At the same time, this was an exploratory study, making a random or totally representative sample less important than it would be in a study testing theories (Babbie, 2007). It should be noted, however, that this research was conducted entirely in the municipality of Copenhagen—the largest and most urban area in Denmark. Its results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to all areas of Denmark, particularly to the more rural areas of Jutland where the economic and social climate is considerably different.

This study's respondents came from a range of backgrounds and appeared to be fairly representative of UU Copenhagen counselors more generally. The UU formed in 2004 so the longest any counselor had worked there was eight years. Nine of the study's respondents fell into this category. The average length of service was four years and nine months, with a minimum time of four months. All of the respondents except two had permanent contracts. One of the temporary workers was assigned to a special time-limited program and the other was filling in for a counselor on maternity leave. Many of the respondents had experience of counseling prior to their tenure at the UU: six counseled in the regular public school system before the creation of the UU and three counseled in technical schools. A full 60 percent (15 respondents) had been classroom teachers before they became counselors. All respondents were native Danes and only one identified as non-white (4 percent of the sample). This means that native Danes and whites were slightly overrepresented in the sample as there were five non-native counselors at the UU (about 5 percent) and 9 nonwhites (8 percent). Thirteen of the respondents were women (52 percent), and twelve were men. This was close to the gender breakdown in the group of counselors as a whole (which was about 60 percent female).

In addition to the interviews with the counselors, interviews were conducted with ten people who worked with youth in other capacities. Three were counselors in alternative schools—places where troubled students can work toward primary

school degrees or can take some time before going on to a youth education. These counselors worked closely with the UU but were not hired by them. One interview was with a long-time manager at the Job Center for Youth. She had worked with the UU on several projects and had an understanding of the youth employment sector. Two interviews were with counselors at technical schools. Again, these counselors were not hired by the UU but worked closely with them. Two interviews were with professionals in the criminal justice field—one with the SSP Program (a cooperation between the schools, social services, and police focused on at-risk youth) and one with a research institute that specialized in youth and crime issues. One interview was with an administrator at an agency that specialized in support services for teenagers and adults leaving prison. Finally, the author conducted one interview with a high-level official in the Ministry of Education. He had been instrumental in the shaping of the Youth Packages and developing educational policy for youth. These supplementary interviews provided a better understanding of the Danish educational system and the UU's role in it but, because they were contacted through snowball sampling, they cannot be considered representative of any larger group.

One challenge the project faced was that the researcher is an American with limited Danish language skills. Whilst almost all Danes speak English fluently, there was concern that some might be reluctant to engage in an hour-long interview. Fortunately, this did not appear to be a problem, and although they were offered a translator, no one took up the offer. There were never any communication difficulties but it should be noted that, in some cases and with their agreement, the author made corrections to the counselor's English to increase the clarity of the quotes herein. In general, the fact that the author was an American appeared to be an advantage. Without preconceived ideas about the Danish educational system, she was very open to hearing people's views and her lack of knowledge about the nuances of the system forced the respondents to think through and explain details that they might have skipped if talking to another Dane.

All interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were directly transcribed and coded using the TAMS (Text Analysis Markup System) software package (Weinstein, 2012). After completing the analysis

and identifying the themes, a summary report was sent to the participants for feedback. The majority read the report and several sent comments, making the process more collaborative than a traditional research design. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. The sections that follow describe the themes that emerged from the interviews. The first three sections relate to the broad education goal; the sections after that describe themes related to the implementation of the goal.

### **Counselor Reactions to the Education Goal**

Not surprisingly, the interviews revealed that the Danish guidance counselors deeply value education—both because they believe it is good for society and because they see it as central to individual development. They are proud to be part of a culture that has an educational and social system that fosters critical thinking. To illustrate this point, three separate counselors told the same story. It is not known if the story was based on truth, but those telling it seemed to believe that it was. The story involves a boat that is used to ship goods around the world. One day it started leaking some type of fluid from the ceiling. The non-Danish workers on board either ignored the fluid or simply mopped it up and went on with their normal duties. A Danish worker, however, was immediately concerned and took apart the ceiling to find the source of the leak. The liquid turned out to be hydraulic fluid that could have caused the ship to explode had it been left alone. The counselors who told this story (with obvious pride) used it as an illustration of how Danes' education makes them superior workers in a globalizing economy.

Given the counselors' strong support of education, it makes sense that most embraced the 95 percent goal—at least in theory. The majority said that it was a laudable goal and that it was absolutely consistent with Danish ideals. Eva, for example, said:

I think the basic ethos behind the 95 percent is to give every individual the possibility of having a good job. If they don't all get a good job, hard luck, but that's the idea. It's a meritocracy really, it's a very good social democratic idea and everybody seems to accept it. I

think the right-wing party and center party have accepted it as well because, through training people, through education, you can create resources, create markets, create future prosperity. This is very much integrated in the Danish political system. Whether it will work or not, I don't know, but that's the idea behind it.

Lisbeth said:

I think it's a good idea to have a goal like that but it depends on how much of the work is only focused on the goal, and not on the process. So it will take more time to get there but I think it's good to have this goal. For a nation like Denmark, it's good.

Eva and Lisbeth reflected the feelings of the majority of the counselors; education is a worthwhile goal, especially for Denmark. The counselors' commitment to education, however, did not preclude serious reservations about the goal. The sections that follow explore some of these concerns.

### **Great...but Unrealistic**

The counselors believed that, given the reality of the world, 95 percent completion of a youth education was simply unattainable. Tobias, for example, said:

It's naïve. It's always been naïve...we have had it for twenty years now and the drop-out is about 20 or 25 percent. You can do many things, and we have done a lot of things, to change it, to facilitate new things and so on, but it's still 80 or 85 percent who are successful and the rest are dropping out. There is no place for them. I don't believe in the goal in a way. It's a good goal and we are working for it but you will never get 95 percent. Never.

One of the primary reasons counselors gave for their belief that the Danish goal was overly ambitious involved mental health and drug issues. They said that they encountered a lot of young people with serious enough problems that it would be impossible for them to complete an education. Speaking about the 95 percent goal, Pia said, “ We'll never get to that because there are too many who are not able to start an education--like maybe they are taking drugs, maybe they are sick or they have problems so I don't think we can ever get to the 95 percent.” Louise made a similar point:

I think it's a bit optimistic, especially in a time of recession but actually I think (the goal) was made before the recession. I think we have more young people with mental problems and diagnoses and other problems than five percent and to imagine that they will be able to go through an education? I'm not sure that we will succeed.

The counselors' perceptions that a significant percentage of students struggled with mental health issues was echoed by teachers at Danish vocational schools. In a report published in 2012 by Kaas and Mulvad, 35 percent of vocational teachers surveyed estimated that 10 to 20 percent of their students had mental health problems (as cited in ICF GHK Consulting, 2013, p. 4).

Counselors like Louise and Pia who believed that 95 percent was unattainable, worried that, over time, the government might be tempted to “dumb down” education to something that even very fragile youth could attain. For example, Erik talked—only half jokingly—about the possibility of a “coffee diploma”:

Oh yes, it's very easy. The goal is very, very easy to fulfill. I've said this from the very first day I heard about it. People look astonished at me (but) I always say, it's just a question of creating (educational paths) that are suitable for the last percentage. For instance, cleaning a coffee machine; make a

diploma of cleaning a normal coffee machine. You can have a bronze diploma. And if you can use a double coffee machine at school or in a workplace where 40 people are going to drink coffee, you can have a silver diploma. And so on. Make some very simple degrees and give them a diploma and say, "now you are educated in this area." Then you can easily reach 95 percent. But as long as we have five to six percent with psychiatric diseases, we cannot reach it with the traditional definition of education or work.

Kenneth agreed with Erik's assessment, commenting that any rise in completion rates may be because, "we have created a lot of artificial educations." I asked a high-level worker at the Ministry of Education if he thought the goal was attainable and his comments were similar:

Maybe we'll define some [new education programs] as (a youth) education, which would be short and in that way it will be possible, like magic, to say "yes, we did it, we made the 95 percent;" and critics will say, "Yes, but do they enter the labor market afterward? And if not, is it an education?" Depending on how you define it, how low or how short, can you create educational courses and still call them education? So maybe it's possible, I don't know.

As is clear from the above quotes, there was fairly widespread concern that the 95 percent goal could encourage the government to lower the standards for what counts as a youth education. At the same time, the counselors were aware that a high-level education for very troubled, mentally ill, or academically unprepared students could be prohibitively expensive because it would require an intensive, individualized program. Denmark already has a few intensive programs and the government does appear to be heading further in that direction with plans to debut a new alternative individualized educational pathway called a "Flex- Education."

### **Hypocritical to push education when there are no jobs**

The Danish guidance counselors understood that they worked for the good of the state but, at the same time, they saw youth as their primary clients. This philosophy is not unique to Denmark; it has been identified in research on guidance counselors in a wide range of countries (Watts and Sultana, 2004; Pryor, 1991). Because of this client-centered philosophy, it was important to the Danish counselors to help each young person make a life plan that fits their interests and would yield them a job. This was difficult because, in today's world, getting an education is no guarantee of a job. Daniel said:

We know that we are poorer than we were. Five years ago all doors were open, now many doors are closed. That's a change. Everyone can see it. Everyone hears about it and then you believe it when you hear it that often. Greece is nearly bankrupt; Italy, Spain. When will it be us? And we are outsourcing our jobs; we are losing jobs so we have a problem.

While education certainly may be valuable for education's sake, the counselors realized that many youth undertake an education primarily in order to get a better job. They worried that young people might feel deceived if there were no jobs available once they graduated. In a sense, the counselors felt trapped—it was their job to convince youth to stay in school and all of them believed in education; but, at the same time, they felt hypocritical urging youth to get an education when there were no jobs available. Frank (unlike many other counselors) believed the 95 percent goal was attainable but he also thought that it would be unfair to graduate too many people in the current economy. He said,

It's realistic that we could get 95 percent but then they are just going to stand there with an education and nothing to do afterwards. So what have we done with that? It's realistic that we could get 95

percent through the system but I'm not sure it's going to help anything because there aren't any jobs there.

Similarly, Martin said, "We're giving a lot of people education where there are no jobs and there are no prospects, so we cannot make a turnover on the jobs, so what's the point?"

Sometimes the counselors drew on their own experiences of the job market and the feelings they had about unemployment. One of the counselors interviewed was employed at the UU on a temporary contract and her term of employment was ending in a few weeks. She had been looking for another job for several months but had not found anything. After the recorder was turned off and the author was preparing to leave, the counselor started talking about what she would do after her job ended. She was clearly concerned and felt disheartened by so many failed job applications. She commented that it felt disingenuous to urge youth to go on to higher education while she, with an advanced degree, could not find work. She concluded, "Sometimes I just feel like a hypocrite."

### **Counseling and Coercion**

As described throughout this article, the counselors generally supported encouraging youth to complete an education. They believed in the government's goal and understood how important education was to Denmark's future. Their support, however, dropped considerably when they saw "encouragement" as moving in the direction of coercion. Their concerns involved both the ineffectiveness of coercion and role conflict it presented for counselors. Three specific policies were frequently mentioned as problematic: child benefit withdrawal, education as a duty, and evaluations.

As described, the Youth Packages made it possible for counselors to recommend that the child benefit be denied to a family with an uncooperative young person (meaning the youth refused to meet with a counselor or engage in planning for the future in any way). While the policy has been enforced in only a few cases, its existence raises a number of red flags for counselors. Perhaps the most common

reason counselors felt ambivalent about the benefit policy was that they did not believe that taking it away does much good—and that it could actually do real harm. For well-off families, the benefit (which is about 110 Euros or 150 American dollars per month for a 15-17 year old, and up to 182 Euros or 250 American dollars per month for younger children) is not a significant amount. For poor families, however, this money can be crucial to the family budget. Charlotte commented, “The parents who have children who are not doing something, they have so many problems so you don't want to put another problem on them.” Johnny worried about the impact on the other members of the family if the benefit was removed:

Also we can threaten to do it but it won't have any effect whatsoever. If we threaten to take it or if we do take it away then the family would just be poorer off and it won't change anything. If we take it, it will only change that they don't have bread and butter on the table and that the little sister in third grade won't have anything. Then the next thing is that some other social workers come and say the little sister can't live there anymore and then they split the family up. So I think you have to be very careful about it and you have to not just look at the one kid but at the whole family.

In addition to concerns about the possible ineffectiveness of the child benefit withdrawal, counselors talked about the difficulties the policy could cause in their relationship with young people. Lisbeth, for example, said, “I don't like it because it's a kind of a new hat we have on. We haven't had that before. It would totally change our relationship with the kids if we had to say (their benefit was being cut off).” Lisbeth's quote reflects the conflict between a client-centered model of counseling and a more coercive model where counselors hold power over their clients. As she put it, this new “hat” could complicate relationships with youth. At the same time, not every counselor thought that the new child benefit policy was a bad idea. A minority supported the policy because they were frustrated by youth who refused

to cooperate or because they believed Denmark was creating an underclass dependent on welfare.

The second policy that caused concerns among counselors involved the government's desire that youth stay in school, take less time off, and complete degrees as quickly as possible (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2012). To this end, the Youth Package II named education as a "duty" for those between the ages of 15 and 17. The counselors found this "education as a duty" and "education right now" philosophy problematic, especially for certain groups of youth. First, some teenagers do not like school and would be much happier simply working. Charlotte said:

[In the past] some of them would go and find a good job without much education—find a good job and make a proper life. I think the opportunities to do that have not increased, but rather have decreased. And also this whole talk about education, more education, more academic skills makes it difficult for some people who just really want to work and aren't interested. Maybe before they could have gotten a good job and it would be okay but maybe it's not that okay anymore.

In addition to youth who did not like school, counselors identified another group of young people who they felt should not be pushed into education: those who were simply not yet ready. For example, ten of the interviewees talked about adolescence as a crucial time for identity formation. They believed that many adolescents need to figure out who they are through experimenting with different paths and different educations. For this reason, they argued that the government's push toward getting youth into education and keeping them in one program could be harmful to the more immature, or less self-directed, youth. For example, Suzanne said:

So something else that is not good...we have to have education but I also feel it's a little bit too much because there's no spare room to take a break and breathe and say "let me take a breath now and I need to

find out who I am and where I want to go." And a lot of young ones choose something now and a half-year later they find out that it wasn't what they wanted. That's why it looks like they drop out, but many of them choose a new thing. So it's not a question about drop out, yes, they do this, but they find a new thing. That's normal.

The counselors believed that immature youth sometimes need time to realize the value of an education or to choose an appropriate path to follow. They also said that some young people find motivation to go back to school because of experiences in a "shit job." Kenneth, for example, said, "I think it's sad because it [education] is not always the right answer to their situation; I think you can learn a hell of a lot with going out and doing a job. Particularly doing a lousy 'shit' job." Johnny also talked about the value of such jobs. He encounters students who have turned off to school and think that education is irrelevant to the real world. Having a job can show them that education and employment require many of the same skills, like being on time and being respectful.

I want them to maybe get a job for three months and get fired because then it's not a teacher, it's not an educator who's "You have to do this." It's a boss who says, "You have to do that, and if you don't do that...if you aren't here at 8 sharp every morning you will get fired." Then maybe they can get a new job and maybe keep that job for six months and then get fired and then maybe they are developed enough to say, "I have to do this."

One of the reasons that counselors felt so passionate about allowing youth to try a range of different experiences was that they remembered their own meandering paths to their current job. Claire, for example, said, "I mean for myself, it took—only now, I'm 34 years old and right now I found that this is what I'm going to do. How many educations have I started and didn't finish? Maybe you just sort of have to get through that." Martin talked about how his own nonlinear path

strengthened his counseling. He said, “I’ve been through the working education, then I went to the high school, then I went to university, then I went to the in-between, like the diploma educations, and now I’m there again getting a short education so perhaps in my counseling I can throw in these stories and experiences and perhaps I’m more capable of counseling and seeing what’s in you and how can I help to get it out.”

The last policy area of concern for counselors involved the mandate to write evaluations for all students in year nine. As described, these evaluations allowed young people to apply for particular kinds of schools that the counselors believed best fit their interests and skills. Louise, talking about her dislike of the process of crafting evaluations, said:

I’m not fond of it because I think that [evaluations] could make me an enemy to some of the young people who think that I might prevent them from starting an education that they want. On one hand, they have to rely on me because I am their guidance counselor so they should be able to take any problem, even personal matters, to my office. On the other hand, they know that I am going to evaluate them on their academic and personal and social competencies, so I think, I think there is—what do you call it—a discrepancy between being their loyal, not friend, but loyal adult and being an authority.

On a similar note, Charlotte said,

You know, when you are selecting people it’s a little bit weird, you know, to have this position. And I don’t like this position that much and I’m not really good at doing it because I want to be more friendly and make them feel good.

The comments about the evaluations echo those about the potential removal of the child benefit—both policies put the counselors in the uncomfortable position of having the power to take something away from the people they feel they should be helping.

### **Whose Responsibility? Individuals vs. the Structure**

Well I think it's a good goal to have because it's about ambition, but, as with all kinds of official goals, it's a way of telling stories about what's good in society and what's wrong in society... And a goal like that becomes part of a story about “the good life is education, it's full-time jobs, it's having lots of spending money.” I mean it is a good goal but what's interesting about a goal like that, it sort of asks whose responsibility is this going to be? Is it the individual kid? Is it the extremely challenged family? Is it their responsibility? What are the schools going to do to meet this? What can we do as counselors? [Kirsten]

This article addresses some of the questions raised by Kirsten. When countries set educational goals, which individuals or groups should be responsible for achieving them? What are the ramifications of those decisions? Denmark has chosen a multi-faceted approach to their goal; one that involves the creation of new and more flexible kinds of programs, increasing the number of apprenticeships so that students can fulfill their school requirements in a reasonable length of time, counseling students to stay in school, and mild sanctioning of noncompliance.

The approach Denmark has taken generally tries to strike a balance between attributing responsibility to individuals and to the system. This is consistent with their culture and history. At the same time, there is some evidence that they are reevaluating that balance. As reported in the New York Times in April 2013, the percentage of working Danes is down and financial pressures are up as the percentage of the elderly in the population increases (Dailey, 2013). The Minister of Social Affairs and Integration, Karen Haekkerup, was quoted in the article as saying,

In the past, people never asked for help unless they needed it. My grandmother was offered a pension and she was offended. She did not need it. But now people do not have that mentality. They think of these benefits as their rights. The rights have just expanded and expanded. And it has brought us a good quality of life. But now we need to go back to the rights and the duties. We all have to contribute. (p. A1)

Haekkerup is not alone in her thinking. Today several branches of the Danish government are considering cutting back on benefits to students and tightening eligibility for disability benefits. The Danish government states explicitly that getting youth through school more quickly and efficiently is a priority (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2012). It is likely that increasing pressure will be placed on guidance counselors to ensure that youth are in school, stay in school, and complete their secondary “youth education” degrees as quickly as possible. Some of the counselors worry about this possibility. Jakob said,

There is a huge tendency toward individualizing social problems....there is a tendency toward that and it's been politically controlled obviously and it's also part of the sort of discourse that takes place in society because the gap between those who can manage the individual plan and those who can't is becoming quite wide. And therein lies the paradox, because, in my opinion, you sometimes end up in situations where you make the hardest demands on the people who are not able to cope. (We say) “You have to do this or otherwise we cannot support you, but basically everything is your own issue, your own problem.”

One of the important issues the Danish case raises for other countries involves exactly the question Jakob asked—where will the balance between individuals and systems be set in efforts to boost school completion? Social scientists suggest that

some European policies (particularly in the areas of criminal justice and welfare) are moving in a more individualistic and punitive direction (Balvag, 2004; Muncie, 2008; Wacquant, 2001). There is evidence of this same trend in guidance counseling policy across Europe as well. In the introduction to an international collection on essays on guidance counseling, Pryor (1991) commented,

Traditionally, professional counsellors have viewed their overriding responsibility as focused on individual clients and their needs. Increasingly, however, governments have abrogated to themselves the prerogative for deciding what is in the best interests of counsellors' clients. Further, they have instructed counsellors to be the means for implementing direct labour-market policies regardless of individual clients' preferences, and for ensuring client compliance through punitive action. This policy challenge, for counsellors to find a balance between their responsibilities to individual clients on the one hand and the social institutions which employ them on the other, looms as being crucial to the future of careers guidance in most countries. (p. 227)

Pryor's comments seem to hold true for the Danish guidance counselors. They resisted individualistic attributions of responsibility because of their client-focused view. They also tended to believe that most of their clients were basically good and would do the right thing if given a chance. For example, Claire was talking about the UU's power to remove the child benefit. She said, "I think it's very rare that we get all the way out there. Often the young people want to do something; they want to go to school, they want to get better and they want this education." Similarly, the counselors thought that parents wanted to do the right thing for their kids as well. Kenneth said, "I mean most parents are interested in their kids' education. It's very, very few situations where the parents are not going to cooperate."

Like Kenneth, Kirsten thought that people wanted to work hard, but that structural factors prevented them from doing so:

I mean it would be interesting to know how many families are in this situation that they can [work or get an education] but they don't want to. That's what the whole [political] discourse is about; the problem isn't that you can't, the problem is that you can but you don't want to. But you can turn this around and say that there are a lot of families who can't right now, but they would desperately like to if they could just figure out how to get on.... I mean all parents basically want the best for their kids. They might be clouded by all kinds of worries or whatever but basically they want the best for their kids.

Because the counselors assumed that people have an interest in doing the right thing, it was difficult to accept individual-blaming ideologies. This is consistent with data showing Danes as having particularly high levels of social trust (Delhey & Newton, 2005). Instead of seeing fault in individuals, counselors tended to identify structural barriers that preclude people from living up to their full potential.

## **Conclusion**

Guidance counselors are—in many ways—perfect allies in state attempts to increase school completion. They tend to support high educational goals, they are committed to education and they want to help youth achieve their potential. At the same time, the Danish case suggests that counselors are resistant to a one-size-fits-all educational path and they worry about the impact of mental illness and other disabilities on the ability of many youth to complete school. Because of this, they question whether educational standards will have to be dropped to attain school completion goals. Many feel ambivalent about pushing youth to complete school when there are not many jobs available.

This article described some of the concerns that counselors have about three specific Danish policies adopted as part of the government's efforts to attain the education goal. These policies (the removal of the child benefit, education being designated a duty, and evaluations for all year nine students) assign the individual,

rather than the system, responsibility for school completion. This appears to result in role conflict as counselors feel uncomfortable being asked to build relationships with youth while also policing their behavior. The counselors also object to the three policies because they have a coercive element, conflicting with their commitment to serving the best interests of each individual young person. This dilemma is well summed up by Watts and Sultana (2004)

Career guidance is essentially a soft rather than a hard policy intervention. At its heart is the notion of the “active individual”: that individuals should be encouraged to determine their role in, and their contribution to, the society of which they are part. The primacy of the individual’s interests is commonly a core principle in codes of practice for career guidance services. There are practical as well as ethical reasons for this, not least that such services can only serve the public good if they retain the confidence and trust of the individuals they serve. (p. 121)

The interviews with guidance counselors indicated that the tensions between what Watts and Sultana call a “soft policy” orientation and “hard” or coercive policies are indeed felt by Danish counselors. Interestingly, policymakers are aware of these tensions as well. The official interviewed at the Danish Ministry of Education commented,

So that was why the Youth Package Two came, because there it says that you have a duty to be in education, employment or another activity between the ages of 15-17. That was, and still is, a discussion between policymakers on one hand and a guy who is a practitioner on the other hand. Politicians are meant to make decisions and we have to solve this problem, and guidance practitioners have a background—a humanistic background—and they don't like to force young people into something that maybe they aren't ready for — so there are some dilemmas in this.

Role conflict between the government as a stakeholder and counselors' "humanistic background" is potentially problematic because it could cause workers to put up resistance toward the policies they see as incompatible (Lipsky, 1980). In the Danish case, however, role conflict may be inhibited by the high levels of trust Danes have in the parliament, the legal system, and in government officials (Grönlund & Setälä, 2012). It is also likely to be limited because of the fact that counselors are generally in favor of the overall goal (Winter, 2003). Role conflict only appeared in the interviews when counselors discussed policies that have coercive elements in them or appear to blame clients.

All European countries, including Denmark, have their own unique cultures, histories, and current policies. At the same time, all are working under similar global and economic pressures as they try to meet the education goals set forth in the Europe 2020 Strategy. This article highlights Denmark's efforts to meet these goals in regard to the role of guidance counselors. Any country interested in taking a similar approach will need to carefully design policies that will be consistent with their own cultures, as well as with guidance counselor practice and experience.

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