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Does it help?
Quality criteria for career guidance in group settings[1]

1. Introduction

I was pleased to be asked to prepare this talk. I have done quite a lot of work on quality criteria, in particular quality standards for career guidance: both the standards for qualifications, and those that are used in quality assurance systems for actual provision.

I knew group work was covered in those standards somehow, so I thought it would be easy to separate out the group work ones and that it would be a useful job to do. But when I began to look more carefully, I realised it was not going to be so easy.

I can only speak from the English language literature. But there group work seems, at best, to be only tagged on to the main standards. Even then it is in a very hit-and-miss way. This may be different in Austria, in which case I would really like to hear about it.

In my experience with quality standards, the writing of the lists can be a dry and technical subject. It is hard because there is a very precise grammar and logic to writing standards. It has a way of sucking the interest out of something that is very lively and creative: the reality of good group work. Today I want to keep in touch with the reality, so instead of starting from theory, or from international perspectives, I'd like to start from the bottom.

When I started to look where group work was actually done, and what quality criteria were used, I realised three things:
1. Some of the best group work was done without using detailed quality standards.
2. Sometimes, where certain quality criteria were used, it made things difficult and actually worse for the clients and the staff.
3. It is not helpful to look at group work itself, or the quality criteria, in isolation from their context.

I thought one way to approach it might be to take some examples from our experience in England. I hope that will raise issues that you might recognise in the Austrian context. We can maybe then look at whether a transnational approach is helpful.

2. The challenges for quality criteria for group work

In my organisation, the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC), we like to look across provision in all sectors and see what they can learn from each other. This is what I am going to try to do today. I will take some examples that I think bring out some of the challenges for quality criteria for groups, and at the same time highlight some of the great advantages of group work that should be part of any quality standards.

I will also ask in whose interests is it that the quality should be good? That is, who are the stakeholders?

So, who is providing group work? These are some of the different locations in my country of group guidance:
- In schools (primary as well as secondary) for young people up to age 18.
- In vocational education colleges for young people over 16 and adults.
- In Universities and other higher education settings.
- For unemployed adults.
- For adults in employment (this is most often only for high-flyers).
- For adults in employment but facing redundancy.

The examples I am going to take will highlight three main points that I think apply to many of them:
- Guidance standards are often »nested« within other standards.
- There are many different funding bodies: each use their own quality criteria.
- Professional associations can play an important part.

I will explain what I mean by »nesting«. Career guidance in groups is often offered alongside other programmes. These have their own systems of quality assurance. This means it is hard to find standards for group guidance that stand alone and do not need to be read alongside other standards.

For example, career education and guidance in our schools is quality-assured as part of all educational programmes by a govern-

ment agency called Ofsted. Ofsted standards themselves do not go into detail about careers work (although many of the outcomes that Ofsted looks for do come from careers work).

So our government has also developed detailed standards for Career Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG). These standards give detail on the content the programme should cover and are used alongside and within the more general Ofsted ones. This nesting is complicated, and in fact the whole inspection regime is stressful for teachers.

The detailed guidance standards do give teachers an idea of what the curriculum should be – and also what they need to be doing with other interested parties, such as parents, and local employers. But they do not cover more generic points about group pedagogy – that is, the first obvious thing that makes group-work different from one-to-one guidance work and should be in the quality criteria.

Group work standards should also convey why group work is a particularly good way of helping people with career management. Why is this?

- People can learn from the others in the group.
- The organiser can bring in outside speakers and specialists.
- Group work can build up peer support: by that I mean for the group members to help and encourage each other.

In addition, in schools, the programme can be improved over a period of years, as each group passes through. Teachers can develop good practice. In schools, group work is also, of course, supplemented by individual career guidance.

All of those types of group work I showed you just now are funded in different ways. So there are different government departments, or different private organisations that want to be sure the work is good. To explain this point I am going to look at some of the programmes for unemployed adults.

There are two broad kinds of these. One kind includes the official, government-funded programmes to get people back to work. The government wants to see lower unemployment figures and less money spent on social benefits. They include many programmes offered by our Jobcentres, which is our Public Employment Service. Jobcentre help is directly linked to the payment of benefits, so it involves an element of compulsion for the clients. They also include a national careers advice service currently called »nextstep«. This is optional, but there is a different kind of compulsion here: one-to-one help is free of charge for some clients, but others can only have face-to-face help in groups.

In both cases, the group provision mainly takes the form of what I call »getting-a-job skill« workshops: one-off workshops, on some aspect of self-awareness or of job-search, like CV-writing or interview skills. These are usually short and may only last half a day or can be an on-going group that people can drop in or out of up to a fixed time limit of a few weeks, before going off to vocational skill training or, hopefully, into a job. I would not call them full guidance or career education, or career management, but they are a part of that work, and they need meaningful quality criteria.

Perhaps because staff and clients have no choice about this, a feeling has grown up among them both that group work is much less use than one-to-one. This is a great shame. It is true that some of the advantages of group work we saw in schools are absent here:

- There is no time for the group participants to build up peer support.
- The funding is never good enough to employ experienced, qualified staff.
- The funding is never long-term enough for them to develop expertise and improve their programmes.

Some of this group provision suffers badly as a result. But in spite of this it is possible to do well what is within the remit, and clear, official quality standards on how to do so would be helpful. The agencies that actually do this group work are subcontracted on an open market and are very varied, so quality assurance would be particularly important. However, none of the standards used for these programmes are specific to group work:

- Nextstep staff have qualifications in one-to-one work, but there is very little about group work in their qualification.
- Nextstep providers must be accredited against our matrix quality standards, but these are very open-weave and contain nothing specific about group work. I'll say a bit more about open-weave later.
- The quality criteria used on the Jobcentre programmes seem to focus on compliance with legal requirements, such as health-and-safety or equal opportunity rules.
- For this funding programme the government is interested mainly in what we call »hard« outcomes, for example the numbers of people getting a job or joining a training programme. They are less interested in »soft« outcomes like increased confidence or longer-term career management skills. It is these which are particularly achievable through good group work.

But in spite of this vacuum, or perhaps because of it, some interesting things are happening. The agencies that subcontract the nextstep group work do have to be sure that the work is good, and some therefore have been developing their own standards. I was shown one set of standards from Eastern region which I thought were excellent.

- They were tailored to the reality of what can be offered in that particular funding programme.
- They were short, clear and user-friendly.
- They covered the career-related content.
- They covered the processes in preparing and in running a group.
- They require that client feedback is collected and also include detail about what that should cover.

The other kind of work for unemployed adults is in what we call the voluntary or »third« sector. This is hugely varied. It is often funded by public money (sometimes European funding), but the work is run by non-governmental organisations. Its great strengths are that:

- It can be targeted at specific groups with special needs such as ex-offenders, or older adults, or people from one very local community, or one trade union group.
- It can take whatever form the providers can negotiate with the funders.
- It can often go on over a longer period than the official programmes.
- Group members can gain confidence from their peer support.
- It can be quite informal.

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There are some quality criteria lessons to be learned from this sector. The criteria they use are as varied as the funders and agencies themselves. They range from overly-tight to the overly-loose: if the funding comes through the European Union, it often involves lengthy and fiercely detailed information about clients, inputs and outcomes – this has actually put off some NGOs from applying for European money. At the other end of the spectrum, the only quality measure may be a client satisfaction questionnaire.

I would like to say a bit more about satisfaction questionnaires which I see as very important. They are not enough to ensure good quality. But if the right information is collected, and if that is used in the right way, they are essential to a good quality service. The information should not just be used to boast about a high percentage of people who are happy about a service but to listen very carefully to the few who are not.

I can illustrate this with an example from the private sector, using group work for adults facing redundancy. This one comes from the Human Resources unit for a very large employer, the BBC, which is our main, and public, broadcasting company for TV and radio.

In the media industry, staff turnover is high enough to warrant a permanent outplacement advice service. The BBC runs a high quality service involving mainly group activities but with one-to-one help also available. People can choose several group sessions, including getting-a-job skills but also career guidance sessions. The only quality criterion they use is a carefully monitored client satisfaction level.

But apart from a thoughtful use of client feedback it is surely also successful because it is a permanent service, so they can build up experience over a number of years; and also it is well-resourced compared to provision in the public sector. The staff have time and resources to develop their own programme and they are given professional space to do so.

Professional associations can play an important part. Their codes of practice are potentially important quality criteria and you can see from my list earlier that there are several different professional associations involved in group work in our country.

My example this time comes from guidance group work in universities. Our professional association in this sector is the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). AGCAS has gone far beyond a simple statement of principles. It runs a professional qualification with its own set of learning objectives. These include a whole four-day training programme entirely about group work, covering nearly all the elements we might look for in a set of quality standards.[2] These include:
- Theories underpinning group work.
- Planning, delivery and evaluation.
- Management, facilitation and communication skills needed, including using a range of facilitative skills.
- The place of group work in the guidance process within the context of their organisation.
- Select, adapt, design and implement appropriate materials.
- Recognise and respond to the needs of different client groups.

This is their work on the training for the staff. For the quality of the actual provision, the national body responsible for quality in universities, the QAA, asked AGCAS to help them write the quality guidelines.[3] This is an example of the professional association being used in the best way. But another important point here is that these national QAA quality criteria are recommendations only. They assume that universities will have their own quality assurance systems, so the QAA offers its standards as precepts – universities can check their own standards against the QAA precepts to be sure they are covering everything they should be. I will be calling these precepts »meta-criteria« and will come back to them. Their advantage is that they provide a framework but let the locals decide for themselves exactly what they want to do.

To summarise all this so far: we have seen at least three different kinds of group work:
- Career education/career management (learning about careers).
- Career guidance, about making immediate choices.
- »Getting-a-job skill« workshops (no wider education or guidance content).

Also a number of different stakeholders have been mentioned each with a slightly different but overlapping interest in maintaining high standards:
- The government, thinking about value for public money.
- Providing organisations, hoping to win future contracts.
- Professionals, concerned about professional integrity and therefore with an eye on their own career development.
- Clients (and their families), who want good help!

Of course, all of the first three are interested in quality criteria in order to improve and deliver the best possible guidance work for their clients. But, to be cynical, they can also all use any criteria in a superficial way, to »tick the boxes« in order to obtain future funding or jobs. Quality assurance systems need to recognise this possible abuse but not assume that the only way to avoid it is to be over-specific.

The quality criteria for group work we have mentioned have taken different forms, including:
- Quality assurance standards (whole service).
- Professional qualifications standards.
- »Precepts« or meta-criteria.
- A specified curriculum.
- Professional codes of practice.
- Legal obligations (e.g. health and safety).
- »Hard« outcome measures.
- »Soft« outcome measures.
- Client satisfaction feedback.

Some of these can be used for external formal assessment and quality control, some can be used internally as a tool to improve provision gradually, and some for either.

2   www.agcas.org.uk/events/467-Group-Work-Warwick [27.5.2010].

3   Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010.

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3. The problem of »open weave«

I have talked to the writers of standards and to practitioners about group work in England and all agree that we have little in English-language official quality standards that is specific about groups. Some I have spoken to are angry about the bad practice that can be found as a result. Given that there are some good examples of group work in guidance, and of quality criteria, why is there so little about group work not only in our main national standards, but also in the international ones?

This takes us back to the problem of »open weave«. When those lists of standards are used for formal, external assessment there is a tension about how specific the standard and its performance criteria are. Being very specific limits their application. But being more general makes them vaguer, and therefore more open to abuse through »box-ticking«.

Our main quality system for guidance in the UK is called »matrix«. It is very successful because it is so open-weave, and it has been adopted across all sectors of guidance. But it is so open-weave, it makes no mention at all of group work as distinct from guidance with individuals.

Another reason for the invisibility of group work comes from another version of the »nesting« problem. It is difficult to draw a clear line between standards for group guidance and standards for one-to-one work: many of the skills needed overlap. But even when they mention group work, standards rarely explain what is different about it. For example, the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) lists 91 competence statements. Only one, 4.4, is about groups, and all it says is »Use group counselling techniques«.[4]

There have been attempts to devise sets of quality standards, the lists of good practice, that would apply to all target groups within a country, or across all countries. It is hard because as I have said there is a very precise grammar to writing standards, so it is very culture- and language-specific – and even before you have finished they can be out of date. For this reason CEDEFOP and The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, ELGPN, have adopted the meta-criteria approach.[5]

This involves listing the topics that the standards should cover, without spelling out the detail of exactly what the content should be. This makes good sense. But if their meta-criteria frameworks are going to be useful for group work, they must make very clear what the most distinctive features of good group work are. None of the European or International standards that I have seen do this.[6]

4. So in summary, what criteria would help raise the quality of group guidance?

Taking ideas from all the examples I have talked about, the most effective quality system for group work would be worked out at a local level, for group work of a particular kind, with particular goals, and for specific target groups.

But, these should be drawn up within a framework set by meta-criteria, agreed at national level. I think these could be made to cover all the target groups I have talked about. Professional associations should be involved in writing the meta-criteria. The meta-criteria should cover process and organisational issues such as:
- Funding.
- Premises.
- Resources.
- Staffing.

The professional standards for staff should include a commitment to the value of group work. They should require the skills and understanding involved in one-to-one guidance as well as group work. The additional group work competencies should take as their starting point those outlined by AGCAS, namely:
- Theories underpinning group work.
- Planning, delivery and evaluation.
- Management, facilitation and communication skills.
- The place of group work within the guidance process.
- Select, adapt, design and implement appropriate materials.
- Recognise and respond to the needs of different client groups.

5. Literature

CEDEFOP (2009): Professionalising Career Guidance: Practitioner Competences and Qualification Routes in Europe. Thessaloniki: CEDEFOP.

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4 IAEVG 2003.
5 ELGPN mission for WP4 Quality can be found at http://ktl.jyu.fi/ktl/elgpn/themes/wp4 [10.10.2011].
6 See, for example, CEDEFOP 2009, in which all the so-called »client-interaction competences« contain a subtitle which says they should all apply to »working with individuals or groups, face-to-face, by telephone or online« but do not specify what the differences between these might be.

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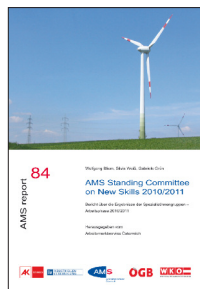
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