Young People's Transitions: Careers Support from Family and Friends

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Young people's informal network of support, mainly from their parents and other family members, has a greater impact on their career development, decision-making and transitions than formal careers guidance. This *Briefing* draws on a recently completed study of a group of young people in the west of Scotland to explore the informal network and its impact and consider how careers guidance services and schools might design their provision to take account of this.

► **Both** formal sources of career support (careers advisers and guidance teachers) and the informal network of career support (parents, families, friends, neighbours etc) were used by young people in this study. But the informal network was the most influential on the vast majority.

► **The** informal network of career support impacted on young people in three main ways, through planned, explicit interventions; implicit assumptions; and unplanned influences.

► **Some** young people had more effective support from their informal networks than others. Some families understood the education and training system and the labour market better and some had more personal contacts, and confidence in using these, than others.

► **The** informal network played the greatest role prior to, and just after, leaving school, but struggled to help young people who continued to experience difficulty in their post school transitions.

► **Where** a young person's informal network was weak, this appeared to have negative consequences for their career development and transitions although a strong informal network was no guarantee of a smooth transition.

► **Formal** networks of career support did not generally take account of, or work closely with, informal networks in the interests of young people's transitions.

► **Parents** and families were largely unaware of the transitional support likely to be available to young people from careers guidance services.

Introduction

Parents and families have a strong influence on most young people's career development, career decision-making and transitions. This informal network of careers advice and information has been described as providing 'the background music' against which the information and advice of careers advisers and guidance teachers (the formal network) is heard. This study explores the nature and influence of the informal network of career support.

What is the informal network of career support?

For the young people involved in this research, the informal network of career support proved to be very broad, encompassing the extended family: aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents and grandparents as well as brothers and sisters and, of course, parents. Also influential were friends, in particular, 'best pals'. Those loosely attached to the family, such as family friends or neighbours, or colleagues of family members were also part of the informal network. TV and other media proved to have had an impact on many of the young people's career thinking, particularly at a younger age.

Membership of informal networks of career support changed as young people moved through different opportunities over the three years of this research. Subject teachers, colleagues and supervisors at work, fellow FE/HE students and sports teachers moved in and out of the network. But in almost all cases, young people and their parents envisaged the family remaining as a key part of the network into the foreseeable future.

The study suggested that there were three categories of influence from the informal network: planned, explicit interventions; implicit assumptions; and unplanned influence.

Planned, explicit interventions

Planned, explicit interventions refers to where those concerned, usually parents, actually *intended* to provide help or advice about career development.

Encouragement and motivation. Some interventions which were potentially important for the young person's career prospects concerned their schooling, for example, where parents intervened to have their child moved from Foundation to General level in key Standard Grade subjects. Some parents made their greatest impact by insisting that their children worked hard at school or stayed on, or 'stuck in' at post school courses or jobs.

> *'I think there's a big thing to get out and earn, especially if a friend's left and doing that and what they don't realise is there's not the opportunities there to earn. You know, it's meaningless jobs, I think, at that age [16]. You really need the qualifications, that's what we kept saying to her all the time'*

Parents' efforts at motivation were sometimes directed at encouraging the young person to develop work discipline or to get experience of earning a living; they were particularly important in making young people proactive in seeking jobs and courses:

> *'Jobs'll no come to you, you'll have to go and get them. Away down to the supermarket and see if they're looking for someone.'*

Raising aspirations. In a few cases parents were encouraging unrealistically high aspirations in their children while several others were concerned not to push too hard. But most often parents tried to encourage their children to make the most of opportunities; this frequently reflected their own regret at not having done so:

> *'He's to go out and do what he has to, 'cos I didn't take the opportunities and you want more for your family than what you've had'*

Practical assistance and contacts. Parents played a key role in supporting the costs of FE/HE courses and helping with budgeting in the early stages of jobs. Grandparents, aunts and uncles often helped subsidise a young person's social life to discourage too early an entry to work to earn a wage.

Members of the informal network were very involved in opportunity search. Parents, other family members and sometimes neighbours and family friends obtained information on education and training opportunities and got application forms, helped the young person fill out applications and ensured that they met application deadlines as well as helping to fix up part-time jobs or work experience.

Where families had contacts in the occupation that the young person was considering, these were drawn in to give information and advice about the specific occupations.

Involvement in the careers guidance process. There were examples of the informal network being involved in the guidance process. Members of the network, often parents, frequently suggested career ideas or reacted to ideas suggested by young people:

> *'I talked her out of it, I told her, You'll no last in that, you'll no want tae dae that.'*

There was considerable variation in the level of intentional involvement in career planning by parents. Some parents lacked confidence in intervening while a minority of young people had non-involved parents or lacked stable family support. It is also true to say that some planned, explicit interventions by parents were unhelpful to their children.

Implicit assumptions

The second type of influence of the informal network was via implicit assumptions, usually from the family. This occurred where values, expectations and assumptions were shared without being clearly articulated. Implicit assumptions commonly related to the acceptability of particular routes, for example, Skillseekers training or university:

> Young person: *'I don't know, I've just never thought of doing anything but go to university'*
>
> Her parent: *'Ever since she's been wee the whole family has kind of expected she would go to university, and there's never been anything to make us think otherwise.'*

Another way in which assumptions were passed on implicitly was through shared values about work. Comparison of parent and child interviews showed many cases in which key work values were shared. In a number of cases both parent and child used virtually the same words to illustrate or define a key work or education value. It was common for families to state that they were leaving the choice to young people when it was clear that they were, in fact, considerably involved in career discussions and decisions. It seems that where values have already been expressed and absorbed by their children, parents have less need to motivate explicitly:

> *'We'd no need to persuade them because what they've been thinking about doing has fell in line with what we'd like them to do anyway.'*

Unplanned influence

Unplanned influence is the third type of impact of the informal network where young people experienced certain contacts or situations which, although unplanned, had an effect on career thinking.

At early stages of career thinking, the media, especially TV, stimulated ideas about jobs, especially 'glamour ideas' such as forensics. Newspapers helped young people and their parents to build a picture of the opportunity structure, especially through their vacancy columns.

Young people absorbed impressions and developed their ideas from the experiences of their parents and families. This could include a parent's experience of redundancy or of re-training. Young people recounted stories of cousins and neighbours who had dropped out of college, struggled at university or had spoken enthusiastically about certain occupations.

> *'He says it's a good job.'*
>
> *'Someone that works beside my mum, she had a degree and couldn't get a job.'*

> *'My big sister's friend did Skillseekers...'*
>
> *'My uncle was telling me that my big cousin that was at uni, it was awfy hard to keep him there cos of a' the pressures he's been under from course work.'*

It was striking that when the researchers tried to discuss these comments, it was evident that they had been absorbed without much examination into the young person's view of their world. Yet some of these statements were key drivers of young people's career-related decisions.

Young people were gaining their view of the opportunity structure primarily from the informal network. This had more impact than the formal networks such as schools and careers advisers. One reason for this is that the informal network, unlike the formal network, can provide 'hot information', that is information from those who are seen as having recent, 'real' experience. There was little evidence that formal guidance providers tried to incorporate this source of information within their own provision.

A very powerful experience in forming young people's picture of work came via part-time work. Almost all of the young people in the research group had had some part-time work while at school or shortly after leaving. Part-time work frequently helped to develop young people's maturity and experience which in turn could contribute to more realistic career decisions or confirmation of career intentions. It was rare, however, for part-time work to be considered within career education in schools, nor did it appear to feature in a major way in careers guidance interviews.

Strengths and weaknesses in the informal network of career support

Members of the informal networks were generally ready to state their opinions and views and had no compunction about giving directive guidance such as *'that would never suit you!'*. Advice from the informal network was valued precisely because it was directive and could give some direction to a young person struggling with career planning. The formal network, on the other hand, often refused to give an opinion, an approach that was sometimes seen as unhelpful by a confused client.

Around a third of the young people in this study were still having difficulty sorting out a career direction some months or years after leaving school. Prior to and just after leaving school, parents and families passed on as much of their understanding and experience as possible. After this, the parents of those who had made a successful transition were mostly content to be in the background. Parents of those who were struggling with transition tended to feel they had reached the limits of what they could do. Informal networks of career support are relatively helpless in the face of career uncertainty: it is at this point that professional help is needed, but there

was little evidence that parents and families were aware of its availability post-school.

Issues

▶ **Limitations of the informal network.** The interventions and influences from the informal network were extensive and it is unlikely that most of the young people in this study would be in their current situation without this. But it has limitations. Its influence can be inappropriate, for example, where unrealistic aspirations are pushed or where young people unthinkingly take on the implicit assumptions of their informal network which may skew or limit their career choice. Moreover, no individual informal network is capable of presenting a complete picture of the opportunities open to young people, particularly when the labour market is changing so rapidly. Formal careers guidance services need both to make explicit the limitations of the informal network and also work to balance it out, presenting a wider view of the opportunity structure and investigating the implicitly held assumptions that are influencing career decisions.

▶ **Different levels of support.** Some young people's informal networks of support were better equipped than others to support them: understanding of education, training and opportunities varied, as did levels of confidence in being able to intervene. Where the informal network was weak, this did seem to have negative consequences on young people's transitions (although a strong informal network was no guarantee of a smooth one). Careers guidance services need to assess the strengths and limitations in an individual's informal network to allow appropriate support to be given to each client.

▶ **Developing the links between formal and informal networks.** Young people were strongly influenced by the informal network in a variety of ways but there were few links between the formal and informal sources of career support. Career education lessons generally did not discuss what the informal and formal networks each can contribute. Parents and families had limited awareness of the broad role of careers guidance services with young people in school and, in particular, of their role in the post school stage. This study suggests that a significant minority of young people may need support in their post-school career development.

In view of the support role played by parents and families, it is important that as Careers Scotland develops an all-age career guidance service, it ensures they are made aware of these services so that they can encourage sons and daughters to access provision.

Overall, better links need to be established between the formal and informal support networks. Formal providers of career education and guidance might consider how best they can complement the informal network, where they might need to supplement it, and also how they might make use of it within their own provision.

Further reading

Semple,S., Howieson,C. and Paris,M. (2002) **A Longitudinal Study of Young People**, Final Report to Ayrshire Careers Partnership Limited, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Howieson,C. and Semple,S. (2001) **Effectiveness of Career Service in Scotland**, Final Report to SEELLD, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Further information

About this study

This research was commissioned by Ayrshire Careers Partnership Ltd. It followed a group of 36 young people over three years as they prepared to leave school and enter post-school education, training or work. The study considered: the factors influencing their career ideas; their experiences of career education and guidance; the effects of formal and informal networks of career support; and how schools and Careers Scotland staff might develop their provision further.

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