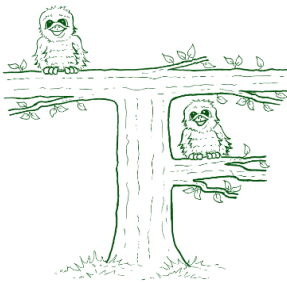


Fledge Town philosophy



"Whilst most people would agree that having the opportunity to visit workplaces can help to build an understanding of the range of careers available in a sector, this statement firstly ignores the possibility that these visits might potentially confirm rather than challenge perceptions" Race (In)equality in England, Charlotte Chadderton in Hooley et al (eds) (2020: p89) Career Guidance for Emancipation.

Summary

- Even though children know they can choose any career, their aspirations are gendered by the age of 7.
- The strongest influences are family and what they see around them.
- Career theory and neuroscience explain why information and rational argument will fail to have a significant impact on stereotypical choices.
- Our strongest tool is the imagination - this can be used to engage the whole brain and create deep shifts in thinking.
- Job titles can be restrictive, tapping into existing constructs and reflecting the world as it is rather than the world it could be.
- The challenge-based approach moves beyond tiles to explore human, environmental and business problems to be solved
- Fledge Town provides an imaginary world that reflects real world challenges, a world full of quirky, brightly coloured birds, each with their own unique way of solving a challenge faced by the town and its inhabitants. Unlike the real world where stereotypes may be reinforced, there are no roles assigned to particular genders, no specific job titles that limit thinking – only delightful birds with roles and talents.



Children are naturally curious about their world and their role within it. Through play, learning and social interactions, they discover their interests, strengths and qualities. They also begin to formulate possible future selves – hypothetical images of the self they would like to be, the self they would like to avoid, their self as a learner, a social and a career self.

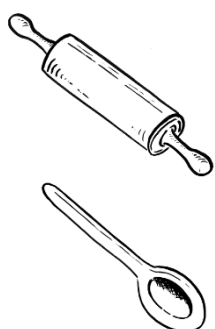
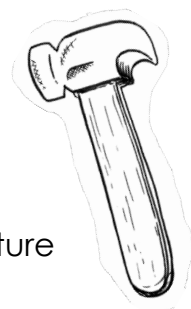


Fledge Town has been created for primary career education, with a focus on developing foundational skills and attitudes rather than specific career choices. It aims to build essential capabilities like self-awareness and understanding the changing world of work, and mirrors elements of career decision-making experienced when progressing from secondary education.

How young should career education start?

"The earlier young people's aspirations are raised and broadened, the better. Good careers education, advice and guidance should create 'lightbulb moments' for young people, making the connection between their studies and the opportunities that await them beyond the school gates." Paul Whiteman, general secretary, National Association of Head Teachers (CDI 2021)¹.

Career-related education begins at a very early age. Children are already absorbing messages from many sources including the people they observe, the games they play, the stories they read (CDI 2021) and the media they interact with – these messages influence what they regard as acceptable and desirable for their future self.



A global study (Chambers et al., 2018²) examining children's career aspirations revealed that, despite understanding they could choose any profession regardless of gender, children's job preferences were gendered at the age of 7. Their aspirations also reflected their socio-economic backgrounds - an unsurprising finding given that children primarily learned about career options mainly through parents and extended family members.

Why is there such a mismatch between what children know they can do and their actual aspirations? Early career choice theory drawn from developmental psychology, labelled age 0-10 as the Fantasy stage (Ginzberg 1971³), becoming more rational and realistic throughout adolescence and early adulthood. However, this idea that career choice is or should be a rational process has long been challenged:

- Sociologists such as Roberts (1968⁴) and Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997⁵) studied the influence of gender and socio-economic background, arguing choice is constrained by external structures. Choice is pragmatic – horizons for action are set by what you can see around you.

¹ Career Development Institute (2021) Career Development Framework, Handbook for Primary Schools.

² Chambers, N., Kashefpakdel, E.T., Rehill, J., Percy, C. (2018) Drawing the Future. Exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Education and Employers.

³ Ginzberg E., (1971). Toward a Theory of Occupational Choice, in Hitchcock W.L. and Kemp Maybry M., eds. *Readings in guidance*. MSS Educational Pub. Co. pages 74 – 78

⁴ Roberts, K., (1968). The Entry into Employment: An Approach towards a General Theory. *The Sociological Review*, 16(2), pp.165-184.

⁵ Hodgkinson, P. and Sparkes, A.C. (1997) Careership: A Sociological Theory of Career Decision Making. *BJSE* Vol18:1

- Bimrose (2006⁶) conducted a longitudinal study that revealed different decision-making styles, citing Scharf's conclusion that there is no evidence for rational matching being more effective than any other approach.
- Collectivist and community orientated perspectives (Arulmani 2007⁷, 2014⁸; Law 1981⁹) challenge the individualism inherent in western rational matching models, emphasising instead the role of community, culture and belonging.
- The importance of place and belonging is explored further in studies of living in a rural community in the UK (Alexander 2023¹⁰).
- The complexity of decision-making with interacting factors such as geography, socio-economic background, self-concept, globalisation, other people, culture, structures, individual psychology, interests and aptitudes, makes the future difficult if not impossible to predict (Pryor and Bright 2003¹¹; Krumboltz and Levin 2004¹²; McMahon and Patton 2022¹³)

In addition to career choice research and theory, developments in neuroscience explain how decisions are made. The rational part of our brain (pre-frontal cortex or system 2) is slow and subject to cognitive overload. In contrast the automatic, unconscious part of our brain (limbic or system 1) is fast and can cope with more complexity. Most decision making is therefore via heuristics or short cuts (Kahneman and Tversky 1974¹⁴; Gladwell 2005¹⁵; Del Campo et al 2026¹⁶).



What's the point in explaining the theory?

Well, it challenges the assumption that simply informing children that they can aspire to opportunities regardless of gender and socio-economic background will lead to them doing so. What they see and experience, what they hear from those close to them, what they receive a positive or negative reaction to, will trump objective information any day.

⁶ Bimrose, J. (2006) The Changing Context of Career Guidance. Guidance, Counselling or Coaching? CeGS.

⁷ Arulmani, G. (2007) Pride and Prejudice. How do they Matter to Career Development: CeGS.

⁸ Arulmani, A. (2014) Career Guidance and Livelihood Planning. IACLP

⁹ Law, B. (1981). Community interaction: A 'mid-range' focus for theories of career development in young adults. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 9(2), 142–158.

¹⁰ Alexander, R. (2023) Who returns? Understanding experiences of graduate return to rural island communities *Journal of Rural Studies* 103(5):103112

¹¹ Pryor, R. G. L., & Bright, J. (2003). The Chaos Theory of Careers. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 12(3), 12-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620301200304> (Original work published 2003)

¹² Krumboltz, J. and Levin, A., 2004. *Luck Is No Accident*. 3rd ed. San Luis Obispo, Calif.: Impact

¹³ McMahon, M., & Patton, W. (2022). The Systems Theory Framework of career development: News of difference and a journey towards acceptance. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 31(3), 195-200.

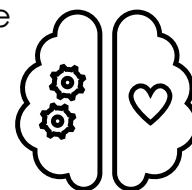
¹⁴ Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1974) Judgement under Uncertainty; Heuristics and Biases, *Science*, 185 (4157), 1124-1131

¹⁵ Gladwell, M. (2005) *Blink, the Power of Thinking without Thinking*. Penguin.

¹⁶ Del Campo, C., Pauser, S., Steiner, E. and Vetschera, R., (2016) Decision making styles and the use of heuristics in decision making. *Journal of Business Economics*, 86(4), 3889-412

How do we challenge the influence of stereotypes?

If the most powerful influence on ideas is what a child experiences in their familial world, then we need to use the most powerful tool at our disposal – the imagination. By engaging the imagination, we can connect the pre-frontal cortex (planning) with the hippocampus (sensory and emotion) (Jensen et al 2024¹⁷). A whole brain approach stands a better chance of challenging the boundaries of the familiar.



Fledge Town is an imaginary world free of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds – moreover it is free of job titles. Why is that important? If we use job titles children's brains will immediately connect the title with any stereotypes stored in their memory. There are other good reasons for moving beyond job titles.



“What do you want to be when you grow up?” In Fledge Town we never ask this question. – children tend to know only a handful from the thousands that exist (never mind the new ones that will exist in the future). The question also infers that they should know who and what they wish to become, leading to feelings of inadequacy if they don't know.

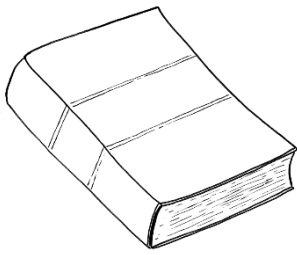
“What difference would you like to make?”, “what problems would you like to solve?” (Michel 2024)¹⁸. The challenge-based approach focuses on the human, environmental and business challenges the children are interested in, creating freedom for exploration. Of course, these are difficult questions to answer without a frame of reference. In secondary school students learn about these challenges through subjects. For example, in science they might explore climate change, public health challenges, sustainable agriculture and pollution; in geography coastal erosion, resource scarcity and natural disasters; in history they may study the roots of current inequalities; in religious education and philosophy they may study human rights, ethics, social justice and questions of identity and belonging; in art and music they may study the relationship to well-being, community and preserving cultural heritage. Every secondary subject will explore its relevance to world, social and personal challenges. In primary education children will also learn about the difference they can make in age-appropriate ways – simple energy saving solutions, local wildlife, recycling, healthy eating, helping in their community and respecting other cultures. Fledge Town's creative and fun filled activities build on these projects, supporting



¹⁷ Jensen, K.T., Hennequin, G. and Mattar, M.G. (2024) A recurrent network model of planning explains hippocampal replay and behaviour. *Nature Neuroscience* 27, 1340-1348.

¹⁸ Michel, J,P (2024) The World Needs You: a New Mindset for Student Career Exploration.

them to develop a positive self-identity with a belief that they can make a difference in their own unique way.



Career-related education begins at a very early age. Children are already absorbing messages from many sources including the people they observe, the games they play, the stories they read and the media they interact with – these messages influence what they regard as acceptable and desirable for their future self.

If the most powerful influence on ideas is what a child experiences in their familial world, then we need to use the most powerful tool at our disposal – the imagination. By engaging the imagination, we can connect the pre-frontal cortex (planning) with the hippocampus. A whole brain approach stands a better chance of challenging the boundaries of the familiar.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” In Fledge Town we never ask this question. – children tend to know only a handful from the thousands that exist (never mind the new ones that will exist in the future). The question also infers that they should know who and what they wish to become, leading to feelings of inadequacy if they don't know. Cheese Wedge is a story from an imaginary world free of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic backgrounds – moreover it is free of job titles. Why is that important? If we use job titles children's brains will immediately connect the title with any stereotypes stored in their memory. There are other good reasons for moving beyond job titles.



Lorna Stalker and Liane Hambly September 2025

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