



Career Education in the final years of Compulsory School in Denmark

COLLECTION:
CAREER EDUCATION
IN THE NORDIC
COUNTRIES

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the lens of career education, understood as a systematic attempt to support pupils' career development, to map and analyse activities described in the Danish national legislation and curriculum for compulsory education. This mapping reveals detailed descriptions of a plethora of interconnected activities spanning from 1st to 10th grade and involving collaboration with career guidance practitioners, upper secondary schools, and employers. The activities identified through the mapping are analysed focusing on the objectives of the activities, target groups, content, responsibility, and organisation and discussed in light of various evaluations of the identified activities as well as research findings. This reveals that despite a cohesive structure (on paper) where each activity builds on outcomes from previous activities, significant challenges exist concerning the provision, meaningfulness for pupils, and expected outcomes of the activities. The metaphor of a house of cards is suggested to capture the progressive structure, its instabilities, and challenges. Finally, the article touches upon the possibilities of using career education as a unifying principle and unifying objective for the plethora of activities in practice.

ABSTRAKT

Denne artikel anvender karrierelæring, forstået som et systematisk forsøg på at understøtte eleveres karriereudvikling- og læring, som linse til at kortlægge aktiviteter, mål, målgruppe, ansvar og organisering beskrevet i den danske nationale lovgivning og læseplan for grundskolen og særligt udkolingen. Denne kortlægning afslører detaljerede beskrivelser af et væld af sammenhængende aktiviteter, der spænder fra 1. til 10. klasse og involverer samarbejde mellem mange parter. De aktiviteter, der identificeres gennem kortlægningen, analyseres og diskuteres i lyset af forskning og evalueringer af området. Dette viser, at der på trods af en, på papiret, sammenhængende struktur, hvor hver aktivitet bygger på resultater fra tidligere aktiviteter, er betydelige udfordringer med hensyn til aktiviteterens implementering i Folkeskolen, gennemførelse, meningsfuldhed

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for eleverne og forventet udbytte. Metaforen om et korthus foreslås for at fange den progressive struktur, men også dens ustabilitet og udfordringer. Endelig diskuterer artiklen mulighederne for at anvende karriere læring som et samlende princip og mål for de mange aktiviteter i praksis.

Young people's choice of upper secondary education (vocational or general) has been a topic of increasing concern in the Nordic welfare states – not only in terms of tackling skills shortages/skills mismatch (EURES, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), but also in promoting social mobility (Andrade & Thomsen, 2021; Felby et al., 2020; Thomsen, 2023; Thomsen & Andrade, 2016), increasing immigrants' participation rates in education (Behtoui et al., 2019; Frederiksen, 2020; Sundelin, 2022), and addressing gender stereotypes (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening et al., 2023; Håkansson et al., 2022; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2023). All Nordic countries provide career education activities of some kind in compulsory school (e.g., Einarsdóttir et al., 2023). Career education is understood as a systematic attempt to support pupils' career development through various educational strategies, including providing information about different occupations, incorporating career-related concepts in the academic curriculum, offering various forms of on-site work experience, and providing courses in career planning (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby, 2009). However, as the analysis will show, national legislation and curriculum in Denmark do not refer to career education, rather the word “activities” are added to the umbrella term career guidance in the legislation and captures almost the same variety of activities as mentioned by Niles and Harris-Bowlsby (2009). Like Rosvall and Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini (2023) did, to reduce ambiguity and highlight the difference in relation to the practice in other Nordic countries (e.g., in Finland the term career education is used in the curriculum and school schedules), we use the concept of career education and guidance (CEG) to refer to more general activities and career guidance solely to refer to one-to-one guidance provided to a pupil by a career guidance professional.

Mappings and the subsequent comparisons of CEG systems are of high value for practitioners in schools, leaders and policymakers (Sultana, 2017). However, according to Barnes and colleagues (2020) few cross-national comparisons focus exclusively on career education. Rather they take a broader approach to map lifelong and life-wide guidance systems (Barnes et al., 2020), and some mappings focus on specific sectors of lifelong guidance systems e.g. secondary school (Sultana, 2018), or specific activities such as work experiment placement for students in compulsory school (Kettunen et al., 2023). In Sultana's (2018) examination of career learning programmes in upper secondary schools, career education emerges as one of the six crucial components. Sultana identifies content, curricula, organisational structures, teaching personnel and methodologies, and assessment modes as vital features for effective career education programmes. Einarsdóttir and colleagues (2023) have recently conducted a comparative study of career education in compulsory schools, revealing distinctions among the Nordic Countries.

In Denmark, compulsory education is from grade 0 (preschool) to grade 9. Children start school during the year they turn 6 and complete lower secondary education aged 14 to 17. Primary and lower secondary education cover grades 0 to 9 or the non-compulsory grade 10. Orientation to occupations and educations was first introduced in a comprehensive school reform in 1960 (BUVM, 1960). Today teachers are responsible for teaching a topic called ‘education and work’ to all grades. No specific demands exist regarding the qualifications of these teachers; however, a new teacher education curriculum contain an optional subject on ‘education and work’ corresponding to 2½ ECTS credits (Regeringen et al., 2022).

Guidance professionals employed at municipal youth guidance units (‘Den kommunale ungeindsats’) provide career guidance regarding the transition from compulsory lower secondary education to vocational or general upper secondary education, or to full-time work (BUVM, 2022a). This guidance takes the form of collective and in-class activities, which will be described below. All municipalities are obliged to have a plan for how to provide coherent career guidance for pupils in grades 1 to 9 (ibid.). Pupils assessed as ‘ready for other activities etc. than general upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary education’ has the right to guidance one-on-one or in smaller groups. Therefore, one-on-one career guidance is not a part of career education activities for all pupils. The term ‘not ready for education’ was replaced

by the term ‘ready for other activities etc. than upper secondary education and vocational education’ in 2022 (BUVM, 2023b). Career guidance professionals employed at the municipal youth guidance units are required to complete a diploma or master’s degree programme in educational and vocational guidance or a bachelor’s degree programme in public administration specialising in career guidance. Alternatively, guidance practitioners with extensive experience in the field can apply for assessment and recognition of their competencies and prior learning (BUVM, 2022a, § 2; 2022d, § 33).

Back in the early 2000’s, the OECD undertook a review of guidance in their member countries and the Danish country report took a special interest in career education. A concern is raised ‘about the rather loose provision for career education within the Folkeskole (compulsory education) ...there is no specification of the number of lessons to be taught, nor are there any mechanisms in place to assure the extent or quality of what is delivered’ (OECD, 2002, p. 8). And that ‘effective career education would seem important both to inform the processes leading to the plans, and to ensure that maximum learning is derived from the experience-based programmes’ (ibid.).

This article aims to identify and investigate career education activities in Danish legislation and curriculum and assess each activity considering evaluations and recent research findings, to contribute to an enhanced comprehension of the potentials and pitfalls of career education within the framework of Danish compulsory schooling.

METHOD

This article originates from a project called NordicCareerEd funded by the NordForsk. Within the NordicCareerEd network, each of the seven country teams prepared so-called ‘country papers’ following this four-part structure: 1) national policies and legislations, 2) national curriculum, 3) other relevant national documents on career education, and 4) a brief review of recent evaluations and research focusing on compulsory education’s career education activities.

Starting from the documents compiled for the ‘country paper’ we have adopted an approach inspired by document analysis, as outlined by Lynggaard (2015). According to this approach, documents represent written texts integral to the documentation and development of public services. The primary objective is to identify patterns of stability and change within a policy domain (Lynggaard, 2015). The approach recommends singling out one or two central texts and employing a ‘chain reference strategy’ to systematically trace and compile documents related to a specific theme for analysis (Kelstrup & Lynggaard, 2019).

We depart from the Consolidation Act on primary and lower secondary schools (BUVM, 2022b) and the Consolidation Act on Municipal action for young people under the age of 25 (BUVM, 2022a) treating them as the primary texts.

Employing the chain reference method, we added to the documents identified in the country paper and incorporated 12 legislation and curriculum texts, identifying activities meeting the definition of career education according to Niles and Harris-Bowlsby, even if not the primary focus (e.g., Consolidation Act on taster courses, BUVM, 2023a). Subsequently, we utilised the terminology of these identified activities to search both ERIC and the website of The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) to include evaluations and research texts focusing on these activities. Twelve evaluation reports and research articles were identified (Table 1.). The results of this strategy were presented to representatives of the Danish Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, the Danish Guidance Association, the Danish Teacher Association, and the Association of Municipalities in Denmark at a meeting in June 2023, to validate the list of included documents, and no additional texts were included thereafter. A comprehensive overview of the activities and legislation including references to acts, bills, and curriculum is presented in Table 2, column 1, under ‘activity and legislation’.

DOCUMENT TYPE	AMOUNT
Legislation and curriculum texts	12
Evaluation reports and research articles	12

Table 1 Number of documents included in the analysis.

Table 2 Summary of objectives of career education activities in Danish compulsory school.

ACTIVITY AND LEGISLATION	OBJECTIVE
Education and work Fagformål for faget uddannelse og job 2017 (BUVM, 2017, 2022b)	Choice of education Knowledge of societal conditions related to education and work
Knowledge of work Arbejdskendskab (valgfag). Fælles Mål 2019 (BUVM, 2019a&b)	Knowledge and skills for working life
Collective career guidance LBK nr 1393 af 05/10/2022 (BUVM, 2022a) BEK nr 1290 af 16/09/2022 (BUVM, 2022d)	Choice of upper secondary programme Completion of the chosen upper secondary programme Skills to seek information and digital guidance Think about own competencies, potentials(komma) and education possibilities
Introduction to the education system and online resources BEK nr 1290 af 16/09/2022 (BUVM, 2022d)	No objective stated besides that of the collective career guidance
Information meetings BEK nr 1290 af 16/09/2022 (BUVM, 2022d)	No objective stated besides that of the collective career guidance
Introductory and taster courses LBK nr 1393 af 05/10/2022 (BUVM, 2022a) BEK nr 165 af 30/01/2023 (BUVM, 2023a)	Choice of upper secondary programme Skills and personal competences
Work experience placement LBK nr 1393 af 05/10/2022 (BUVM, 2022a) BEK nr 1290 af 16/09/2022 (BUVM, 2022d)	No objective stated
Introduction to the application process including the study choice portfolio BEK nr 1290 af 16/09/2022 (BUVM, 2022d) BEK nr 159 af 30/01/2023 (BUVM, 2023b)	No objective stated besides that of the collective career guidance No objective stated for the study choice portfolio

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

We approached the documents as valuable sources of information regarding national-level career education policy (Karpinen & Moe, 2012). Employing a qualitative inductive method for text analysis, we identified categories such as aim (or the absence thereof), target groups, content, responsibility, and organisation, along with a central category emphasising the interconnections among activities within each policy document and across documents. Subsequently, our analysis progressed to trace the interconnectedness of career education activities across multiple legislative texts. Lastly, we connected these findings to evaluations and research outcomes, aiming to ascertain whether these activities can be considered a systematic effort to support students' career development, aligning with the framework outlined by Niles and Harris-Bowlsby (2009).

FINDINGS: A MACRO-LEVEL APPROACH TO CAREER EDUCATION IN DENMARK

Rather than presenting each analytical category separately, our reporting approach involves addressing each analytical category within the context of the identified activities. This choice is intentional – we aim to provide readers with an understanding of how the activities sequentially build upon each other. However, when considered in the light of research and evaluation findings, this perception of a cohesive system of career education activities faced challenges.

Below, we present the results of the analysis. We start by detailing the objective, content, and structure of the topic 'education and work', which is to provide a foundation for CEG activities within lower secondary school (grades 8–10). We then detail the objectives of the other career education activities and show interconnectedness. As mentioned, the term career education is not used in legislation and curricula, although career learning and learning-oriented educational guidance are starting to be used. Examples are 'The teaching guideline' for the 'education and work' topic (BUVM, 2018b) and Fact sheets regarding activities in the transition

from lower to upper secondary school (BUVM, 2022c). Nonetheless, the mapping resulted in quite a large number of activities that fall within Niles and Harris-Bowlsby's (2009) definition of career education and these are in many cases mandatory for pupils in Danish primary and lower secondary education.

EDUCATION AND WORK

It is mandatory for Danish schools to teach the topic of 'education and work' in grades 0–9 (BUVM, 2022b, § 7). There are no stipulations regarding the amount of teaching, no specific number of lessons allocated. The legislation states that the school and the municipal youth guidance unit are to work together in planning lessons in 'education and work' (BUVM, 2022a, § 6).

The framework for the topic education and work consists of 1) common objectives, 2) a syllabus, and 3) teaching guidelines. The common objectives for the topic comprise three binding and interconnected competence areas: 1) personal choice, 2) from education to work, and 3) work life (BUVM, 2017). The teaching guidelines describe how working with the common objectives can support pupils' career learning and how the topic should be integrated in lessons in compulsory subjects and part of everyday teaching (BUVM, 2018a,b).

The stated objectives involve pupils:

gaining the necessary competences to make career choices based on their preferences and abilities, understanding the importance of lifelong learning and comprehensive knowledge regarding educational and vocational options. (BUVM, 2017, p. 1)

Furthermore, pupils should:

become acquainted with different conditions and forms of life and learn about circumstances and conditions tied to education, career, and the labour market in a global world ... The topic of education and work should challenge pupils' own educational choices and enhance their readiness for upper secondary education. Pupils should gain a broad knowledge of society and an understanding of the labour market. Furthermore, pupils should gain knowledge about the different upper secondary programmes and which jobs and career opportunities they can lead to. (BUVM, 2017, p. 1)

We argue that the process of choice-making can be seen as the focus of the objectives for the topic of 'education and work'. This is apparent in highlighting of 'necessary competences to make career choices' and of 'knowledge and skills preparing them to make educational and vocational choices and to understand these choices as a process'. This interpretation is in line with studies that find a relatively large focus on educational choice in the teaching of education and work and in the educational guidance offered to pupils in the final years of compulsory school (EVA, 2021; Poulsen et al., 2016; Skovhus, 2014, 2018).

Evaluations of the teaching of 'education and work' at Danish primary and lower secondary schools have found significant between-school variation in the amount of time spent on the topic, ranging from 1 to 20 hours per year (EVA, 2022a). Less than half of the schools provide systematic teaching on the topic of 'education and work' (DEA, 2018). In a 2022 survey, 76% of municipal youth guidance unit managers reported that closer collaboration is needed between guidance centres and schools in order to support a systematic and coherent plan and process for the provision of the topic 'education and work' at this level. Just 45% of municipal youth guidance unit managers reported positive collaboration with schools. 44% of municipal youth guidance unit managers stated that ensuring pupils have access to coherent activities relating to CEG is, to some extent, a priority (EVA, 2022a). Furthermore, Skovhus (2018) has pointed to the arbitrary manner in which teaching of the topic of 'education and work' is organised and practised across schools. This leads to significant inequalities in access to information about education and work and different educational and vocational possibilities following lower secondary school.

As such, these evaluations and studies highlight major differences in how the topic 'education and work' is prioritised and organised, both at the municipal level and between individual schools. Priorities at the school level are highly dependent on the principal, and, at schools where the principal does not consider the topic of 'education and work' a priority, the extent to which it is taught, and the quality of this teaching depend on the individual teacher's assessment of the topic's importance (EVA, 2022a, 2022b).

According to the legislation, the topic 'education and work' provides the foundation for career guidance provided by the municipal youth guidance units from grade 8. It is stated that this guidance is supposed to build on the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils within the topic (BUVM, 2022a, § 6). In that sense, pupils are expected to have obtained certain learning outcomes, skills, and knowledge from their participation in education and work when they meet the career practitioner in grade 8.

In summary, while the legislation and curriculum for the topic of 'education and work' in primary and lower secondary education appears to provide a solid foundation, the implementation seems somewhat fragile and disjointed with inequality in access to career learning opportunities. The inconsistent implementation of the topic also means that the career guidance process starting in grade 8 is based on a more unstable foundation than the legislation and curriculum suggest.

These challenges on implementation of 'education and work' may have consequences for the pupil's outcome of the subsequent career education activities that is provided in grades 7–9 in the Danish Compulsory school. The result of the analysis of these activities are shared below starting with the elective topic 'knowledge of work'.

KNOWLEDGE OF WORK

In grades 7–9, pupils must choose at least one elective subject. One of the electives that the school can offer pupils is the one-year course 'knowledge of work' (arbejdskendskab in Danish), but it is not a requirement that the school offers this elective (BUVM, 2022b, § 9). The purpose of the course is to support the pupil in acquiring skills enabling them to assess career paths and opportunities and acquire knowledge about the labour market and working life (BUVM, 2019a). No figures are showing how many schools offer knowledge of work as an elective subject, nor how many pupils choose it. The elective subject is absent from all evaluations and studies of CEG in compulsory education in Denmark included in this analysis.

COLLECTIVE CAREER GUIDANCE

In Denmark, all pupils receive collective career guidance (grades 8–10) from a career guidance professional employed at municipal youth guidance units collective guidance activities are provided at the class level (BUVM, 2022a, § 3,5) but can also involve guidance activities in smaller groups. Since 2014, only pupils 'not ready for upper secondary education' have access to one-on-one guidance in addition to the collective career guidance activities.

According to the Danish Ministry of Education and Guidance Order (BUVM, 2022d, § 4), all pupils in lower secondary school (grades 8–10) should, as a minimum, be offered the following activities:

- Introduction to different vocational or general upper secondary programmes
- Introduction to the national digital guidance portal and the digital career guidance service
- Information meetings for pupils and their parents
- Introductory and taster courses for upper secondary programmes (mandatory in grades 8 and 10)
- Work experience placement/job shadowing – schools are not required to organise such activities but cannot deny access to pupils who organise work experience or job shadowing themselves
- Introduction to the application process for enrolment in a vocational or general upper secondary programme, including the study choice portfolio

The municipal youth guidance units are responsible for providing these activities in cooperation with schools as a coordinated programme for all pupils (BUVM, 2022a). Coherence and progression for each pupil across the different activities must be ensured (BUVM, 2022a, § 1).

Below, we take a closer look at these activities and the framework in which they are provided, identifying objectives, expected outcomes, responsibilities, and funding mechanisms. We are particularly interested in relating the activities to the concept of career education, defined as a systematic attempt to support pupils' career development, and spanning a wide range of informational, instructional, educational, and experiential activities.

The level of detail varies in the descriptions of the different activities in the legislation and in recently published fact sheets produced by a national committee appointed by the Danish Ministry of Children and Education on 'Better transition for pupils from compulsory school to secondary education' (BUVM, 2022c). This will be reflected in the upcoming sections.

INTRODUCTION TO DIFFERENT VOCATIONAL OR GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY PROGRAMMES

During grades 8–10, pupils are entitled to an introduction to the range of upper secondary programmes, both vocational and general (BUVM, 2022b). No specific objective is stated for this activity. The introduction, usually conducted as an oral presentation of the six different upper secondary programmes that pupils can apply for, is part of the school-based collective guidance activities provided by the municipal youth guidance units. Sometimes the various upper secondary programmes are also introduced at a parents' evening at the school.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NATIONAL DIGITAL GUIDANCE PORTAL (UG.DK) AND THE DIGITAL CAREER GUIDANCE SERVICE (eGuidance)

According to the 'Act on guidance and choice of education,' municipal youth guidance units must ensure that digital tools are an integral part of guidance provision (BUVM, 2022a). It is in this respect that an introduction to the national guidance portal (UG.DK) and eGuidance becomes important. No other objective is stated regarding this activity. UG.DK provides descriptions of the Danish education system, of all education programmes and related job prospects, and of access to career guidance and counselling. eGuidance is an ICT-based service where a team of professional guidance counsellors provide a personalised service to anyone seeking guidance on education and employment, supporting their choice of upper secondary education, higher education, and continuing training.

The online information portal and access to guidance play a vital role because the classification of pupils as either 'ready for upper secondary education' or 'ready for other activities etc. than general upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary education' means that only the latter group has the right to individual guidance or guidance in smaller groups, while the pupils classified as 'ready for upper secondary education' are expected to make use of the various digital tools and the eGuidance service. This is probably why the legislation provides very detailed information about activities such as the introduction to online tools and guidance. There is little research on the use of the national guidance portal (UG.DK) and eGuidance (for a detailed description of the development of digital tools and the challenges involved, see e.g., Jochumsen, 2020), but according to internal figures, there were 11.5 million visits to the website UG.DK in 2020. It is not clear how many of these visitors were lower secondary pupils and their parents as UG also covers higher education and adult and continuing education (BUVM, 2022a). The Ministry of Education has stopped conducting user-satisfaction surveys among pupils, but the last survey from 2016 showed that pupils who visited UG.DK had a satisfaction score of 4.2 measured on a 5-point grading scale (internal figures from UG.DK).

As such, consideration is given to the systematic introduction of digital guidance tools and services to pupils as part of class-based collective guidance. However, evaluations and studies have shown (EVA, 2017, 2019) that when these tools and services replace the opportunity to receive individual career guidance from a career guidance professional, many pupils feel excluded and isolated, without support during the process of transitioning to upper secondary education.

INFORMATION MEETINGS FOR PUPILS AND THEIR PARENTS

As part of their official mandate, municipal youth guidance units are expected to provide parents with information about the career guidance offered to pupils and about the educational opportunities after completing lower secondary education (BUVM, 2022d, §4). The guidance they provide must be organised in a way that involves parents in the guidance process and the children's educational planning. The Ministry of Education stipulates that the information provided, as far as possible, should also cater to parents whose mother tongue is not Danish (BUVM, 2022d). No specific objective is described for this activity.

All the activities described above – the introduction to different vocational or general upper secondary programmes, introduction to the national digital guidance portal (UG.DK) and the digital career guidance service (eGuidance), and information meetings for pupils and their parents are mentioned as part of the career guidance provided in compulsory school and do not have individual objectives stated.

INTRODUCTORY AND TASTER COURSES FOR UPPER SECONDARY PROGRAMMES

The municipal youth guidance units are required to organise experience-based activities called introductory and taster courses for pupils in lower secondary school (BUVM, 2023a). These courses allow pupils in the final years of lower secondary education to visit (general or vocational) upper secondary programmes, giving them a 'taste' of the different conditions, levels, requirements, and environments before making their choice.

In grade 8, all pupils in Denmark must participate in two such introductory courses, at least one of which should be for a vocational programme. Each of these courses spans two or three days.

In grade 9, pupils who have been assessed as 'ready for other activities' or have not decided on their next steps after lower secondary education are offered additional taster courses at general or vocational upper secondary programmes for a duration of up to four weeks. Pupils attending the optional grade 10 are obliged to participate in taster courses for at least five days, and this can be expanded to up to five weeks (BUVM, 2023a, § 3, 9, 12).

It is stated that introductory and taster courses are intended to both challenge and qualify pupils' choice of upper secondary programme. Furthermore, the goals of these introductory and taster courses are to allow pupils to experience different study environments and both practical and theoretical elements of educational and training programmes, as well as to familiarise them with some of the fields of work to which the different programmes can provide access (BUVM, 2022a, § 10a; 2023a, § 1).

The municipal youth guidance units are responsible for organising the logistics around the courses. The responsibility for preparing pupils to take part in introductory and taster courses and for follow-up discussions and reflections in the classroom is shared between teachers and guidance professionals (BUVM, 2023a, § 1). Introductory and taster courses are financed through the taximeter system, meaning upper secondary schools receive a fixed per diem payment from the state for each pupil that participates in an introductory or taster course. In a survey from 2019, 97% of responding pupils reported that they had visited an upper secondary programme at least once as part of an introductory or taster course (EVA, 2019).

All the activities described above – the introduction to different vocational or general upper secondary programmes, introduction to the national digital guidance portal (UG.DK) and to the digital career guidance service (eGuidance), and information meetings for pupils and their parents focus on introduction and information and are expected to add to a foundation of learning outcomes that the pupils have acquired through the topic education and work. As pointed out previously the provision of education and work is very uneven and, in many schools, non-existent.

WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENT

Schools can offer pupils at all levels a work experience placement. While schools are not required to organise such activities, they cannot deny access to pupils who organise work experience or job shadowing themselves. As such, pupils are entitled to one-week work experience placements

in both grade 8 and grade 9, while 'unpaid work experience with an educational perspective' is offered to pupils in grade 10 (BUVM, 2022b, § 9; 2023b). Work experience placements during grades 8–10 can also be regarded as part of the career guidance activities offered by municipal youth guidance units.

The national guidance portal informs parents that:

Work experience placement is your child's opportunity to try a real job ... to test an idea or dream – or try something completely new – and gain real-world experience. Maybe your child will discover something new about him- or herself, a new skill or interest. A work experience placement can inspire your child in making educational choices and help in deciding on a post-school path. It can also offer a change of scenery if your child is tired of school. (UddannelsesGuiden, UG.DK)

As such, it is underlined that a work experience placement can support a broadening of horizons in terms of education and work, develop greater awareness of different possibilities, and help in choosing a path forward. It is important to note that, although seen as something to which pupils have a right, work experience is an activity where the onus of initiative is on the pupils themselves unless organised by the school or the municipality. The pupils do not receive pay during work placements and schools and workplaces are not financially compensated.

There is no system for the schools or the municipalities to report on work experience placements so there are no official statistics on the number of pupils participating in such activities. A 2019 study of educational choices in grade 9 showed that 62% of the surveyed young people had participated in work experience placements in either grade 8 or 9 (EVA, 2019). This study predates the legislative amendment granting work experience placement entitlement to pupils in grade 8 and 9 (BUVM, 2019c). However, no indications suggest an increased number of work experience placements since then. In the same study, 68% of respondents indicated that participating in a work experience placement had helped them learn about education and work to some or a great extent. This figure was higher among those considering a vocational education and training programme, with 81% responding that the experience of being in a workplace had helped them learn about education and work to some or a great extent (EVA, 2019). Louw (2020) conducted an evaluation that focused on early counselling support and the entitlement to work experience placements based on a questionnaire survey among pupils in grade 8. Here, more than half of the respondents indicated that a work experience placement had given them new insights into their interests and abilities, as well as opened their eyes to new fields of work, thereby providing them with new input when making future educational and career choices, including the options when choosing a vocational education and training programme (Louw, 2020).

Although neither mandatory nor subsidised, work experience placements seem to support young people's career development. The pupils that take part often report significant outcomes, yet, due to the absence of systematic integration at the national level, not all pupils participate in a work experience placement. After all, it supports pupils' career development by providing them with new insights into their interests and abilities regarding fields of work they might not have previously considered – insights they consider important when making future educational and career choices. As such, work experience seems to be a core activity in career education in Danish compulsory school.

INTRODUCTION TO THE APPLICATION PROCESS FOR ENROLMENT IN A VOCATIONAL OR GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY PROGRAMME, INCLUDING THE STUDY CHOICE PORTFOLIO

During the final years of lower secondary education, pupils should receive an introduction to the process of applying to a vocational or general programme at the upper secondary level (BUVM, 2022d, §4). As part of the application process, pupils compile a personal study choice portfolio during grades 8–10, describing how they have benefitted from the guidance activities in which they have participated. Schools can decide how to include the study choice portfolio in the teaching but must ensure that pupils in grades 8–10 work systematically with the links between school, upper secondary and tertiary education, and the labour market (BUVM, 2023b, § 12). However, when uploaded during the application process, it should include a

questionnaire, called the self-reporting form, to be completed by pupils that includes a broad range of questions on topics such as participation in relevant activities, personal strengths and motivations, and future aspirations. While filling in the online application for enrolment in upper secondary education, pupils are instructed to attach the self-reporting form. Although it is possible to apply for an upper secondary programme without doing so, by designing the system in this way, the Ministry of Education nudges all pupils to complete the questionnaire as part of their enrolment process. The Directorate for Quality in Education under the Ministry of Education, confirms this procedure, in an email correspondence, although stressing that pupils who apply for vocational education are obliged to include their study choice portfolio to maintain their legal right to enrol in vocational education.

The rhetoric surrounding the study choice portfolio has been criticised as overly complex, especially the instructions for parents and pupils – these instructions have a LIX score of 56, which is higher than some academic reports (Schødts & Kjær-Jepsen, 2019). While study choice portfolios have been in use since 2017, there has yet to be conducted research on the content, quality, or effects.

The self-reporting form based on the study choice portfolio can be seen as an activity in which all the various career education activities come together in a coherent process for pupils to reflect upon. According to the legislation, teachers and guidance professionals support pupils in seeing the purpose of the various activities in which they have participated and in systematically reflecting on and noting what they have learnt. In such case, the process of working with the study choice portfolio can function as a supportive frame, bringing the different activities together by encouraging pupils to reflect on how each activity has contributed to their career development. However, this process is dependent on all the previous activities being conducted and that pupils note what they have learned along the way.

DISCUSSION

In our examination of career education in Denmark at the macro level, we have delineated a diverse array of activities that have been established to support and facilitate the career development of pupils. Nonetheless, this mapping endeavour has concurrently revealed several systemic inadequacies within the existing framework mainly related to the provision in practice. Subsequently, in the ensuing discussion, we scrutinise the inconsistencies and cohesiveness among these manifold activities designed to support pupils in their career development leveraging insights from contemporary research conducted in both Danish and international contexts. Building upon this analysis, we posit the advantages that could potentially accrue from the implementation of a distinct career education perspective rooted in the idea of career learning within the Danish educational landscape.

The mapping revealed a plethora of well-described and, on paper, neatly aligned activities. A curriculum is in place for the topic of 'education and work', which is to be taught at all levels of primary and lower secondary education. According to the legislation, pupils gain knowledge of the labour market and insights into their current strengths and abilities – learning outcomes upon which the career guidance process that starts in grade 8 is expected to build. Meanwhile, research and evaluations has shown that, there are considerable variations in whether and how the topic is implemented and taught at schools (DEA, 2018; EVA, 2017, 2019, 2022a, 2022b; Skovhus, 2018). With principals often lacking knowledge about the topic and not considering it a priority among the many requirements schools are expected to meet (EVA, 2022a), this purported foundation for career education in Denmark is far from stable – thus we use the metaphor of a house of cards to characterise the overall idea of interconnectedness and progression as well as instability and structural weaknesses. A house of cards is a structure made by stacking playing cards in a pyramidal fashion with alternating vertical and horizontal layers, and as a metaphor, a house of cards describes a structure or argument built on a fragile and shaky foundation.

CAREER EDUCATION IN DENMARK – A HOUSE OF CARDS

Like a house of cards, career education in Danish compulsory education can be seen as having a pyramid structure, where the various activities form smaller triangles that are stacked alongside

and on top of each other and where the stability of this composite structure is dependent on the layers beneath. As such, the robustness of career education activities during the later years of compulsory education is dependent on a stable foundation in the form of earlier activities. Meanwhile, as we will argue, these foundations are far from stable – like a house of cards, the Danish system of career education is fragile.

The topic ‘education and work’ can be seen as the first horizontal layer, which should provide the foundation for the delivery of career guidance by the career guidance professionals from municipal youth guidance units. The activities described above – the introduction to different vocational or general upper secondary programmes, introduction to the national digital guidance portal (UG.DK) and the digital career guidance service (eGuidance), and information meetings for pupils and their parents – can metaphorically be seen as triangles in a horizontal middle layer built on the foundation of the topic education and work. The outcomes of these activities depend on the stability of this foundation. The introductory and taster courses can also be seen as a triangle in the horizontal middle layer but as a more solid and independently cohesive than the other activities. The financial support provided through the taximeter system ensures that introductory and taster courses are provided systematically across the nation and are attended by most pupils. One might say that the cards in this triangle are glued together, meaning that were the house of cards to collapse, while this triangle would fall to the ground, it would remain intact. In other words, introductory and taster courses would continue as a career education activity even if other activities were to fall apart. Finally, the self-reporting form based on the study choice portfolio can be seen as the top of the pyramid, completing the house of cards. It is here that all the various career education activities come together in a coherent process for pupils to reflect upon.

In our analysis, we have undertaken an examination of the stated objectives of the identified career education activities as outlined in legislation and curriculum documents. Many of these activities share a common overarching objective, which centres on guiding pupils towards making informed choices regarding their educational pathways and ensuring the successful completion of their upper secondary programmes.

Skovhus and Thomsen (2020) have previously articulated a pertinent concern in their study on taster programmes. The concern is that:

When students, maybe with good reason, perceive career guidance activities as intended to help them make a choice, many of those who have already decided on a particular upper secondary programme find them a waste of time ... The reason for this is that the taster programmes, with few exceptions, are detached from the curriculum of the various compulsory school subjects and, as such, not integrated in classroom teaching. The activities become isolated, one-off events with no systematic preparation beforehand or facilitated reflection afterwards. (p. 260–261)

They advocate for a fundamental shift in the orientation of taster programme activities and school-based career guidance in general. Their argument is rooted in the need to redirect the focus from mere educational choices towards a more comprehensive and holistic career learning approach that fosters young individuals’ exploration of education and career possibilities. This shift is deemed essential, as a significant proportion of pupils encounter challenges in recognising the relevance of these activities, especially after they feel to have already determined their educational trajectory. Additionally, the perceived relevance of specific, isolated activities may diminish if they do not align closely with the upper secondary programmes that students are contemplating (Poulsen et al., 2016; Skovhus, 2018; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020).

This insight underscores the imperative of reevaluating the scope and purpose of career education activities to better release the learning potentials of the activities. This is in line with previous research that shows that feedback and debriefing sessions after work experience placements and job shadowing activities, where students are encouraged to reflect on what they have learnt, contribute to positive outcomes (Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017).

INTEGRATED CAREER EDUCATION ACTIVITIES OR OBLIGATORY PROCEDURAL TASKS?

The analysis conducted have revealed a lack of a coherent and overarching objective for the identified career education activities. While certain activities do share a primary focus on pupils’

decision-making and successful programme completion, in other instances, objectives are either absent or appear limited in scope, often confined to the mere provision of the activity itself. In cases where pupils question the pertinence and significance of these activities, the sole rationale offered within the legislation is their mandatory nature. This reliance on compulsion as the primary justification can create challenges for educators and guidance professionals who aim to view these activities as a systematic means of supporting young peoples' career development.

Consequently, rather than perceiving these activities as integral components of a structured approach to career development, they may be perceived as obligatory procedural tasks. This, in turn, can impede teachers and guidance professionals from effectively justifying the value and purpose of these activities to both pupils and their parents. It underscores the need for a more comprehensive and meaningful framework for these activities to systematically contribute to young peoples' holistic career development.

Combining our macro-level mapping of career education activities and knowledge provided by evaluations and studies, the need to align currently isolated activities and thereby offer pupils coherent and progressive career education becomes apparent. This need is also emphasised in the legislation, although, according to the managers of municipal youth guidance units and principals at primary and lower secondary schools, there is still some way to go in achieving this goal (EVA, 2022a). One possible explanation, supported by research, is that the collaboration between schools and municipal youth guidance units seems somewhat arbitrary due to insufficient time, competencies, and leadership.

One might contend that, instead of constituting a systematically and progressively structured series of activities that align with the intended legislation to support pupils' career learning, evaluations reveal that young people perceive these activities as disconnected.

To overcome these challenges researchers have stressed the need to present pupils with a broader perspective on education and the world of work – a *Bildung* perspective – to promote career learning at both the individual and the class level (Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). This includes a recommendation to implement career learning as a pedagogical and didactic paradigm in school and relate it to the overall purpose of compulsory schooling in Denmark (Poulsen, 2020, p. 7). While this challenge was highlighted in the 2002 OECD review of career guidance in Denmark the analysis reveals that it persists in the Danish career guidance system.

CAREER LEARNING AS A PATH TO SYSTEMATIC PROGRESSION

The concept of career education has proven useful as a lens through which to identify relevant activities. We, therefore, suggest that it might function equally well in framing these activities, providing cohesiveness by highlighting their interrelatedness and supporting systematic progression. This, in turn, would strengthen the activities' relevance for pupils and provide municipalities and school principals with a guiding principle in developing a coherent plan for the provision of these mandatory and important activities.

In response to the uneven level of implementation and lack of coherent provision, research has taken an experimental approach to studying the effects of a more systematic approach to career education with a focus on pupil's career learning. In the research project 'Insights and Outlooks' (Poulsen et al., 2016), activities were prepared in alignment with Bill Law's (2010) approach to career learning as a four-level progression with a focus on preparation and follow-up activities in class to support pupils' reflections and learning outcomes. An impact evaluation of the activities showed that pupils: 1) gained a broader perspective on jobs and working life (and themselves), 2) developed greater openness/curiosity towards education and jobs, 3) highlighted positive effects about hope for the future, motivation, and school fatigue, and 4) became aware of prejudices about vocational education by comparing to their own experience of vocational education. The latter activity supported a dialogue in class about prejudices and hierarchy between vocational and general upper-secondary education (Poulsen et al., 2016). In 2021, the Danish Ministry of Education funded a register-based follow-up study tracing pupils' education pathways among the participants in the original career learning project. This showed that these pupils were more likely to still be (remain) in education and to have enrolled in vocational education than peers who had not been part of a systematic career learning programme. This was especially evident among pupils with low-skilled and low-income parents

(Eriksen et al., 2021). These findings support previous research in suggesting that career education and career learning could function as a more explicit pedagogical and didactic paradigm supporting a systematic and progressive approach to career education in secondary school. To achieve this, the structural weaknesses of the current system need to be addressed.

The study has certain limitations that warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, the analysis focuses on policy documents in relation to existing evaluations and research. While some of these evaluations and research studies draw on empirical data from previous practices, it is essential to note that the analysis does not encompass current practices in Danish compulsory schools. This highlights a need for future research that delves into the current practical implementation of career education in schools, considering the perspectives of both students and practitioners.

Furthermore, the study lacks an exploration of the historical development of policy documents. Consequently, the results are confined to an examination of the current state of affairs in the legal documents without an identification of historical developments, whether positive or negative. Although the research and evaluations inherently have a historical dimension, attempts have been made to incorporate recent studies. However, this approach may introduce a potential temporal misalignment between the analysis of legal documents and the correlation of these findings with outcomes from evaluations and research.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have mapped and analysed the legislation and curriculum for career education in Denmark at the macro level and critically discussed the results in relation to recent evaluations and research.

We have shown that a definition of career education helps identify and organise activities that are already in place to support pupils' career development, even though career education is not an explicit guiding principle across these activities. In Danish legislative documents regarding compulsory education, the various career activities are presented as a coherent system, interlinked, and building on one another. However, in practice, the career education activities are often conducted and experienced in isolation rather than as part of a systematic attempt to support pupils' career development and career learning.

We have used the metaphor of a house of cards to illustrate the instability and structural weaknesses of career education in Danish primary and lower secondary education. This instability is evident from the various discrepancies we have identified between the macro-level descriptions and the practical implementation and real-world outcomes of the activities as depicted in the research and evaluations.

In conclusion, our discussion has underscored the need for more explicit objectives in career education activities. Without clearer goals, there is a significant risk that these activities may be perceived as irrelevant, potentially leading to a lack of prioritisation by both students and educators. The danger lies in the activities themselves becoming the primary focus, rather than serving as facilitators for meaningful career learning experiences. Aligning with the insights of Sultana (2018), we advocate for the adoption of career education and career learning as guiding and unifying principles. This approach provides a robust didactic and pedagogical framework, fostering a systematic and progressive method for organising the mapped activities. Such an approach is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness and relevance of career education initiatives in the educational landscape.


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