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New Views

how a focus on career learning in compulsory school can broaden the educational opportunities for pupils

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New Views – how a focus on career learning in compulsory school can broaden the educational opportunities for pupils

Abstract
This paper presents preliminary results from a Danish research and development project on career learning in compulsory school. The aim of the project was to broaden the perspective on education and world of work among pupils in the final years of compulsory school through career learning activities based on experience-based learning and reflection. To that end, teachers and guidance practitioners worked together with VET-schools, Upper Secondary Schools and local companies in order for the pupils to both experience and sense different educational and occupational opportunities and systematically reflect on these experiences in connection with the subjects of the school and the pupils’ own self-insight.

A main finding in the follow-up research is that the participating pupils overwhelmingly changed their attitude towards VET-programs and artisan professions to a more positive view after the project. Moreover, that this change largely can be ascribed to the career learning approach in the project activities, focusing on preparation, adaptation and reflection. Additionally, that the career learning approach resulted in making VET-programs real possibilities for post-compulsory education to a large group of pupils and something they consider.

This finding leads the paper to recommend a career learning approach as organizing principle for working on widening the educational and occupational opportunities for pupils and broadening the perspectives on the career possibilities within VET-programs. The paper ends by recommending more research into understanding how the openness from the project activities can be maintained all through the final years of compulsory school.

Keywords: career learning, career theory, VET-programs, choosing, educational choice

Introduction
Both official reports and assertions from guidance practitioners, teachers, parents and young people themselves show that Danish pupils in the 7th to 9th form (age ca. 13-15) experience major challenges when they are in the process of choosing post-compulsory education. One central factor
is lack of knowledge of both the educational system in Denmark and the world of work, especially when it comes to VET-programs and vocational occupation, which results in unfounded prejudices against VET-programs, VET-schools and artisan careers. (Juul/Pless, 2015)

The lack of knowledge lead to young people having problems making a meaningful choice of education and occupation. Dropout in VET-programs and preference of upper secondary school are logical strategies that follow. (Sørensen/Pless, 2015) In the light of these challenges, the national organization Local Government Denmark and the Danish Union of Teachers funded a project called “New Views” that focused on how pupils in 7th to 9th form can obtain more knowledge and experience with youth education, occupation and the job market through experience-based learning. The assumption of the project was that pupils, who experience more tangible meetings with post-compulsory education and with the job market, together with a stronger emphasis on reflection over these meetings; build a stronger basis for durable career choices, both in the forthcoming situation and in a lifelong perspective. (Fremfærd, 2014)

**Processes in the project**

Thirteen pilot projects took part of the overall project, covering 17 different schools nationwide, approx. 65 forms, 1400 pupils and 70 teachers. In addition, more than 70 local companies and a large number of institutions of post-compulsory education and youth guidance counsellors. Each pilot project made an application in order to be accepted in to the overall project, describing the scope of their project and how it was based on career learning. (Fremfærd, 2014)

They were thirteen very different projects: some worked primarily with the personal and social skills of the pupils. Others focused on how different subjects could contribute to and support career learning, relocating for instance math classes to the local VET-school, so the pupils worked with math in practice through brick-laying, forging, carpentry, and understanding how essential math is in order to become a good artisan. Others again focused on work experience, going into partnerships with local companies and having the pupils examine or undertake concrete work tasks at the work places in order to see how many different job positions an iron foundry or a hospital actually needs to run. (Poulsen, et al, 2016)
The project was inspired by career learning theory that defines the process of making qualified choices as a matter of learning. Bill Law’s theory on career learning contributed with a fundamental framework for understanding this process. It operates with four levels of learning:

1. The first level is about experiencing, sensing, hearing, feeling, that is the gathering of impressions, information and contacts to make progress.
2. The second level is about sorting the impressions, so that you understand differences and similarities.
3. The third level is about focusing on, what and whom you have to pay attention to, and what is important for oneself and for others.
4. The last level is about understanding and knowing how something works, and being able to explain and anticipate actions. (Law, 1996, 2001)

Seen through these four levels of learning, a successful choice of education in 7th to 9th form has to be built upon the pupils’ very concrete meeting with post-compulsory education and the world of jobs. The meeting must be prepared properly and give the pupils the opportunity of sensing and experiencing the education, and it must be object for adaption and reflection afterwards in order for the pupils to sort out, focus and understand the meeting. (Ibid; Skovhus, 2014)

Thus, the projects focused on how to further develop methods and structures for cooperation between the final years of compulsory school, youth education and the labor market in order to enable the pupils to progress through all four stages of learning in Law’s theory. Thereby strengthening both the inner and outer learning motivation of the pupils. (Pless et al, 2015)

Some experience-based methods of guidance already exists in Denmark today, e.g. bridging courses, introduction courses or work experience. Hence, the project focused more on the many opportunities and perspectives for career learning inherent in teaching and classes, pedagogically preparing and afterwards adapting the work experience or experience in bridging courses and supporting the pupils’ reflections on the experiences, thereby creating a closer link between teaching and guidance.
Research Methodology
The research phase was organized as a performance evaluation of the overall project. The aim was to compile the reports and evaluations of the local projects, collect data across the local projects and to put up a question of evaluation that was able to cover the complexity of the many projects. (Dahler-Larsen, 2013)

When collecting the empirical data we focussed on the six projects that had the highest degree of completion (or success) in organizing the projects in a career learning perspective. All six projects reached the point where a change in pupil behaviour regarding post-compulsory education and occupation could be detected. These six projects were examined thoroughly through interviews with key persons involved in the local projects and with pupils. (Dahler-Larsen, 2013; Poulsen et al, 2016)

The survey, on the contrary, was sent to all pupils in all of the projects and was designed to focus on the pupils’ experienced learning outcome in relation to education, occupation and themselves, and the degree to which they are thinking differently and talking differently with their parents about education and the world of work than before. (Ibid.)

Furthermore, each of the local projects were obliged to send in a final report on their project, documenting the activities and cooperation they had made, and evaluating their project. These reports were also a central part of the empirical data.

Results
When analyzing the interviews with pupils from the local projects we made an interesting finding: the pupils voiced a significant change in impression with regard to VET-programs. Shortly put, after having participated in career learning activities that had a focus on learning rather than choosing, and that were properly prepared and reflected afterwards, the pupils we interviewed expressed a new interest in and respect for VET-programs. In an interview, one girl explains that before the project you were considered slow or stupid if you did not chose an upper secondary program after compulsory school. After having experienced working hands-on with math in a VET-
program as part of the project she says that it “opened a bit more for me thinking that I could go to a
VET-school as well.” Another girl told us that she had learned from the activities that “all people
[and their choice of occupation] must be treated with equal respect.”

We wanted to explore whether these and similar experiences only came into play with our interview
persons or if it were a broader result. Therefore, we let this finding inform the survey that were
distributed to all participating pupils and asked the same question as in the interviews. The result
was unequivocal: An overwhelming majority of the pupils ascertained that they now have a more
positive impression of VET-programs than before they took part in the project.

In the survey, we also asked the pupils who had gained a more positive view on VET-programs
whether they are considering a VET-program after having participated in this project, and more
than 40% of these pupils answer that they indeed are. In a cautious comparison (cautious because
the design and target groups were different) with the latest national user survey on guidance in
compulsory school where only 24% of the pupils, who applied for upper secondary education,
indicated that they had been considering a VET-program, this seem to show that the project has
helped broaden the educational possibilities of the pupils and made different careers possible to
choose for more pupils.

The decisive factor here seems to be career learning. Simultaneously with the opening up for VET-
programs as a possible choice of education in both the survey and the interviews, the pupils base
this widening of their views and options on the (career) learning process they have undergone
during the project. As one pupil puts it: “[the project] opened my eyes to all these different
opportunities that existed (…) I found out that there were quite a lot of opportunities, and that it was
not only this one thing.” Another pupil describes how his entire class reacted rather negatively when
they were told that they were spending an entire week at a VET-school, but when the week had
ended “everybody was thinking that they had had a really cool week.”

This reflection or recognition does not only come from the experience of seeing everyday life at a
factory or meeting a VET-program (the sensing level in Law’s terminology), but also from the work
the pupils and their teachers did before and after meeting, visiting or working together with the
educational or occupational sector. In the survey, between 50 and 70% of the pupils answer ‘to
some degree’ or ‘to a high degree’ when asked if the project has given them new information about education, work life and about themselves. Between 45 and 49% of the pupils answer ‘to some degree’ or ‘to a high degree’ when asked if the project has made them think differently about education and talk in a different way with their parents about education and occupation. Below these numbers lies the work in the individual projects with the levels of sensing, sorting, focusing and understanding. (Poulsen et al, 2016)

**Recommendations**

The process of increasing the interest in VET-programs is long and complicated, and we can point to no easy or quick solution. But the experiences from this project show that something can be done in order to stimulate the curiosity among pupils toward VET-programs and to widen the educational and occupational opportunities for pupils, so that they at least take VET-programs into real consideration when they choose their post-compulsory education.

The results of this project points to career learning theory as a strong foundation for organizing teaching and guidance on education and occupation. A foundation that stresses not only the concrete meeting with education and jobs, but also the systematic reflexive processes that lie before and after the meeting, which incorporates the experiences as progressive learning. The results show that this foundation actually makes the VET-programs more interesting and attractive to the pupils and makes them become relevant as potential post-compulsory education for a large group of pupils who had a less positive view on VET-programs before the project. (cf. Skovhus, 2016, 2014)

Two-thirds of the pupils in this project were 7th or 8th-formers. They have additionally a year or two before making their final choices of youth education. It would be interesting to examine their actual behavior when making that choice and see if the changes carry on.

We recommend that a priority of the research community should be understanding how curiosity and positive attitudes towards VET-programs can be maintained all through the final years of compulsory school, so that VET-programs actually remain real educational and occupational opportunities to the pupils.
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