17. FROM CAREER CHOICE TO CAREER LEARNING

Taster Programs and Students' Meaning-Making Processes

ABSTRACT

The Nordic countries have a tradition of experience-based career guidance activities. One such activity is taster programmes, which, to varying degrees, allow young people in all the Nordic countries to experience different educational and career paths. The chapter explores the participation of lower secondary students in taster programmes and their meaning-making processes in relation to the programmes. We argue that there is a need to shift the focus of taster programme activities, as well as of school-based career guidance in general, from the students' educational choices to supporting young people's learning about education and career.

INTRODUCTION

The Nordic countries have a tradition of experience-based guidance activities, such as job shadowing, taster programmes, 'skills' competitions, career and education fairs, and 'open house' events where lower secondary students and their parents visit upper secondary schools (Thomsen, 2014). In this chapter, we focus on taster programmes as an experience-based guidance activity and as an activity practised in all the Nordic countries to a greater or lesser extent, as well as being part of career guidance activities/methods in a wide range of countries in Europe (Sultana, 2004) and beyond (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). In Denmark, for example, there are so-called 'bridge-building courses' (Euroguidance Denmark, 2014) where lower secondary students visit institutions offering upper secondary programmes. Taster programmes are mentioned as an activity within career guidance in the OECD definition from 2004:

The activities [within career guidance] may take place on an individual or group basis, and may be face-to-face or at a distance (including help lines and web-based services). They include career information provision (in print, ICT-based and other forms), assessment and self-assessment tools, counselling interviews, career education programmes (to help individuals develop their self awareness, opportunity awareness, and career management skills),

taster programmes (to sample options before choosing them), work search programmes, and transition services. (OECD, 2004, p. 10)

In brief, the objective of taster programme can be described as to offer individuals the chance to sample options before choosing them. In this article, we outline how taster programme activities are structured in the Nordic countries. The Danish system is outlined in the most detail since the research conducted by Skovhus (2018), on which the article is based, was conducted in Denmark. Skovhus' research examines taster programmes from the perspective of young people: What are their experiences when participating in taster programmes in lower secondary school? How do they make sense of the activities which are mandatory? Both Skovhus' research (2018) and this chapter highlight problems associated with framing activities such as taster programmes in terms of choosing a career, thereby illustrating the need for and benefits of a stronger focus on the learning potential that the activities hold.

TASTER PROGRAMMES IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Røise (Chapter 18, this volume) describes legislation concerning career education and career guidance in lower secondary schools in the five Nordic countries. She emphasises the diversity of policies and practices surrounding career education in the Nordic countries. This diversity also applies to taster programmes for lower secondary students.

In Iceland, it is not mandatory for schools to offer taster programmes. Practice varies from school to school, from no activities to an intensive career education programme. For instance, four schools have developed an intensive scheme in which students in their final year of lower secondary education spend one day a week gaining practical work experience. During this time, students spend time in six different workplaces. The programme has not been the subject of a formal evaluation, but anecdotal evidence indicates that the programme includes little in the way of shared reflections, assessment of learning outcomes etc. by the schools (Vilhjálmssdóttir, Chapter 10, this volume).

In Sweden, a new act came into force in July 2018 making it mandatory for schools to work with practical familiarisation with working life (Prao), reintroducing the subject following its abolishment as a mandatory subject in 1994 (Regeringskansliet [Government Offices], 2017). The goal is that students gain knowledge about working life, supporting an informed choice of study and career. With the new act, it is compulsory for 8th grade students in lower secondary school to attend Prao for at least 10 days. Prao involves practical work experience, primarily in a workplace but also at upper secondary schools (Skolverket [The central administrative authority for the public school system], 2018).

In Norway, students in lower secondary education have the right to 'necessary guidance' on education, job opportunities and occupational choices (Kunnskapsdepartementet [Ministry of Education and Research], 2006, chapter 22).

‘Educational choice’ is a mandatory subject for students in their three final years at lower secondary school [ungdomstrinnet] (Utdanningsdirektoratet [Directorate of Education], 2015). Neither in the act stipulating the right to necessary guidance nor in the national curriculum for educational choice is it stated which activities are to be included in the career guidance process. However, in practice, all students in 9th or 10th grade visit one or more schools that offer upper secondary education. The length of these visits varies. Some students also participate in job shadowing at a company (personal communication with Røise).

Career education and career guidance are a compulsory element in the curriculum in all lower secondary schools in Finland where a total of 76 hours are allocated specifically to such activities during the final years of lower secondary education (grades 7–9). In addition, students are entitled to individual guidance and group counselling. During grades 7–9, the school is required to organise courses providing a practical introduction to working life (TET/PRAO) in order to create a foundation for educational and career choices. TET/PRAO is implemented in cooperation with other school subjects, utilising their content and working methods (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; OECD, 2014, p. 180).

In Danish schools, teachers are responsible for providing career education activities in a subject called ‘Education and Jobs’, although no specific number of lessons is allocated (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019a, para. 7). Guidance professionals provide career guidance regarding the transition from compulsory lower secondary education to vocational or general upper secondary education or to full-time work (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019b, para. 3). The legislation states that career guidance should build on the knowledge and skills the students have acquired in the subject Education and Jobs to help students make informed and qualified choices (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019b, para. 6). It also states that coherence and progression must be ensured in the career guidance process (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019b, para. 1). In addition, a number of mandatory career guidance activities are outlined, including taster programmes.

In 8th grade, all students in Denmark visit two vocational or general upper secondary programmes. These visits are spread across two or three days. In the 9th grade, students who have been assessed ‘not ready for upper secondary education’ or are undecided what they want to do next are offered additional opportunities to visit general or vocational upper secondary programmes (see Jensen, Chapter 8, this volume, for an explanation of educational readiness). The 10th grade is optional, but for students attending the 10th grade, participation in taster programmes is mandatory (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2017). The goals of the Danish taster programmes are that students experience different study environments and both practical and theoretical elements of educational and training programmes, as well as becoming familiar with some of the vocations, professions or jobs that specific programmes or fields of education provide access to. Furthermore,

taster programmes should both challenge and qualify students' choice of upper secondary programme. Lower secondary schools and youth guidance centres share the responsibility for preparing students to take part in taster programmes and for follow-up discussions and reflections in the classroom (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2017). For a more detailed outline of the Danish career guidance system, see Jensen (Chapter 8, this volume).

To sum up, all Nordic countries have taster programme activities for the students in lower secondary schools. Most have legislation that describes such activities, but the practical implementation at schools varies.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON TASTER PROGRAMMES

A number of studies have highlighted the positive effects of student participation in taster programmes.

About 60% of the students in 8th to 10th grade in Denmark indicate that taster programmes have helped them in choosing their next educational step (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut [Danish Evaluation Institute], 2016, p. 25). An evaluation of students' educational choices found that taster activities often function as a way of confirming or rejecting a choice that has already been made (DEA, 2018a, p. 7). Job shadowing in a company and taster programmes at educational institutions can have a positive effect on decision-making competencies and clarify educational choices (e.g. Buland & Havn, 2000; Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017; Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2007). Taster programmes can potentially offer students inputs which support their deliberations regarding their choice of education, becoming acquainted with the subjects taught and the social environment at the educational institution they visit. They can also offer time to experience the buildings, students and teachers in the flesh. These visits can generate a more concrete idea of what it would be like to study there and confirm or challenge students' preconceptions. Even for students who have already made up their minds, taster programmes can offer a plan B by highlighting alternatives. Furthermore, the taster programme can lead students to consider options that they were not previously familiar with or had written off due to negative preconceptions or to re-evaluate their original plans as the reality did not match their expectations (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut [Danish Evaluation Institute], 2018, pp. 27–29).

In a study of teachers in the UK the majority stated that they believed that work experience and employer engagement activities have a positive impact on the academic achievement of pupils (Kashefpakdel, Rehill, & Mann, 2017). There is evidence that the opportunity to explore different career opportunities helps shape the individual's ideas regarding education and work opportunities (Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf, & McKeown, 2016). Adequately preparing students for work experience, as well as feedback and debriefing sessions where students are encouraged to reflect on what they have learnt, has been shown to contribute to positive outcomes (Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017). Generally, research has shown that work

experience is most valuable when it is embedded in a broader set of career learning activities (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014).

Among managers of Danish youth career guidance centres (see Jensen in this volume for an up-to-date overview of the Danish guidance system), 60% stated that schools offered little or nothing in the way of preparing students to participate in taster programmes and helping them process their experiences afterwards. In addition, the managers pointed to a lack of coherence and progression between taster programmes during the final years of lower secondary education and other career education and guidance activities (DEA, 2018b, p. 15). Indeed, many schools do not teach the career education subject Education and Job (DEA, 2012). To sum up, research on and evaluations of taster programmes show that they can provide students with greater insight into educational programmes and institutions, thereby supporting them in making informed educational choices. The studies also suggest that it is essential that such activities are thoroughly planned and followed up in order to support students' reflection and learning from the activities.

In relation to the international research from outside the Nordic countries we will raise the question of how specifically Nordic the approach to experiential career learning is. For example, it seems similar to what is done in the UK.

In the following, we present the case of Laura, a Danish girl who took part in taster programmes during her final years of lower secondary education. The case is selected strategically in the sense that it contains a number of elements that are prominent in the total empirical data presented in Skovhus (2018). The case offers insight into the complexity and dilemmas of career guidance activities for young people in Denmark and allows the reader to bring his or her own interpretations into play and compare them to the analysis of the case presented in this chapter. Below, we also outline the theoretical approach which was used in the research project (Skovhus, 2018) from which this case is drawn.

A FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE ON CAREER GUIDANCE ACTIVITIES

Laura took part in Skovhus' doctoral research (2018). The research was conducted from 2013 to 2017 and included 41 full days of participant observation and situated interviews in two Danish municipal schools. Special effort was made to observe and talk with the young people about activities provided by the youth guidance centres. In depth research interviews about taster programmes, one-to-one career guidance dialogues, follow-up activities, assessments of educational readiness etc. was conducted with 12 students. The aim was to learn from the students' first-person perspectives on these activities. Observations and situated interviews began towards the end of 8th grade and continued throughout the 9th grade, the final year of compulsory schooling in Denmark. Follow-up interviews with 11 students took place approximately six months after the students finished the 9th grade, at which point some students, including Laura, were enrolled in the optional 10th grade and therefore experienced another round of taster programme activities.

The research project's theoretical position and foundation is Danish-German critical psychology, which sets out to conduct research from a first-person perspective. Critical psychology particularly emphasises subjective participation in practice (Mørck, 2006). From this outset, our work is inspired by social practice theory concerning action, practice, community, meaning, intentions, reasons for action and everyday conduct of life. This theoretical approach was chosen out of a desire to study career guidance and career education from a participant perspective and include structural conditions in the analysis. Through a first-person perspective on young people's personal experiences of concrete dilemmas in practice and an investigation of personal meaning-making processes, it is possible to learn about social structures and conditions related to these experiences (Højholt & Kousholt, 2009; Holzkamp, 2013, p. 275). Turning the lens to career guidance theories and methods, the emphasis on meaning, everyday life, practice, community and intentions coincides with careership theory, as developed by Hodkinson and colleagues (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, Bowman, & Colley, 2006). Careership theory is based on ideas and concepts from Bourdieu, who was himself inspired by the work of Marx and the importance of practice and dialectics. This inspiration from Marx is something careership theory shares with critical psychology. Central concepts in both critical psychology and careership theory include actions and horizons for actions. We will return to these concepts later, but first we turn our attention to Laura's account.

'NOT TO MY TASTE' – WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE STUDENTS?

Laura's story sparks a discussion of many aspects related to taster programmes, as well as to other types of experience-based career guidance activities. We find the following aspects important to consider: how the activities are framed, expanding horizons and supporting students' reflections.

The Danish legislation on career guidance focuses on supporting students in making choices (see Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019b). This focus is also central to the practice of career guidance professionals (Skovhus, 2018). In her research, Skovhus found that students generally valued the taster programmes if these programmes were in line with their existing sphere of interest and they were yet to decide on their choice of education. This was also the case for Laura when she was in 8th grade and visited HF [The Higher Preparatory Examination Programme]. She found the visit relevant because she was undecided about which education to choose after lower secondary school, and because the education which she visited, HF, was one she was already considering.

In the 10th grade, Laura participated in the taster programmes again, but this time she felt that she had already decided upon her choice of education. As we see from her narrative, she found it irrelevant to participate in the taster programme.

Laura

In 8th grade, Laura chose to participate in the Higher Preparatory Examination Programme (HF) for her taster programme. She thought the course was okay because she was undecided about her educational choice and the visit gave her insight into the HF, which she considered a relevant option for her.

Later, Laura begins 10th grade, certain that she will enter the HF-programme the following year just as her brother had. It is mandatory for Laura to take part in the 10th grade taster programme. Laura chose to revisit the HF, which she found pointless because she already knew about HF and had already decided that this was what she wanted to do after 10th grade. Besides visiting HF, it was also obligatory for Laura to experience vocational education, and she chose to join the taster programme at the basic healthcare college, because four other girls from school would be attending.

Laura had this to say about her time spent at the basic healthcare college:

It was really terrible, oh my God! This education, it has nothing for me at all. Working with old people, or generally with people in that way, is absolutely not what I would like to do for a living. We were at the basic healthcare college, and then we were at the nursing home. It was so awful. I simply cannot cope with things like that. There's this smell of dead people everywhere, I just can't. And then there's the kind of people who go to basic healthcare college. In my world, these are the kind of people we call chavs, who have had a hard life and dye their hair red and stuff. I just can't handle those kind of people. There are the types [of people] and then there is the school. They didn't exactly sell themselves especially well. In the lessons, they taught us theories about conflicts, all sorts of things ... The only thing that was amusing was the one time we got to ride in a wheelchair. That was because it was funny. It was really awful. Seriously. I just couldn't have gone there. And I knew that already.

Laura's example shows that the same student can experience taster programmes as both a help in making a choice and as pointless and irrelevant. We argue that this has to do with the framing of the programmes. The aim of the taster programmes is to contribute to students' imminent choice of education; when we follow this logic, it is quite understandable that students can see little point in participating once they feel that they have made up their minds. We saw how this affected Laura's perception of the relevance of the activities, with her choice of the HF-programme marking a clear watershed. Only a few of the students in Skovhus' study (2018) found it meaningful to explore educational and career paths they did not personally consider a relevant choice.

Such a focus on short-term educational choices is neither new nor unique to Denmark. The OECD wrote already in 2004 that ‘Too often services fail to develop people’s career management skills, but focus on immediate decisions’ (OECD, 2004, p. 3). A Norwegian study found that the majority of guidance practitioners in lower secondary schools regard supporting students’ immediate educational choices as the primary objective of guidance. The study also found that most students share this view, seeing guidance as something that should primarily help them in deciding what to do next (Haug, Schulstok, & Bakke, 2016, pp. 31–32).

To sum up, it might not be beneficial to the students’ sense of relevance to present supporting educational choices as the sole purpose of career guidance activities. We argue that there are potential benefits if guidance activities such as taster programmes were to focus more on career learning and less on decision-making. This could be done by seeing such activities as an opportunity to explore and learn, incorporating systematic reflection, and could be supported by drawing upon Kolb’s experimental learning theory, as suggested by Hooley and colleagues (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013, p. 124) and by Haug (2018). The insight from Laura’s account calls for further consideration of the purpose and function of taster programmes. Are they intended to provide the individual with information to be used in making the right, the appropriate or the most rational choice? Or should they spark curiosity and learning, encouraging individuals to explore career-related questions in their lives? Should and can they do both at the same time?

Confirming Assumptions and Expanding Horizons

Laura’s visit to the basic healthcare college leads to self-reflection; for example, she underlines that she is not and will not become ‘a chav’. She states that, in her opinion, the basic healthcare college is far from her areas of interest. One could say that Laura has gained insight into an educational programme and got a glimpse of one of the jobs it qualifies for, and that it has led her to think about herself and the students at the basic healthcare college. It could thus be argued that the activity has contributed to her career development process. However, we would question whether this should be considered a meaningful contribution, drawing inspiration from theories and definitions of career guidance and career education.

Careership theory was developed by Hodkinson and colleagues (1997, 2006) and views decision-making as pragmatic, rational and located in the habitus of the individual. Horizons for actions is a concept used to highlight that a person’s choices, decision-making and progression in life are inextricably tied to the position from where this person views life, as this position limits which possibilities are visible. The situatedness of persons and career guidance interventions is often overlooked in career guidance theories and methods, although there are exceptions, such as the work of Blustein and colleagues (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005) and Bassot (2012), among others. A recent attempt by Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen to develop a definition of emancipatory career guidance states that:

Career guidance supports individuals and groups to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures ... Career guidance can take a wide range of forms and draws on diverse theoretical traditions. But at its heart it is a purposeful learning opportunity which supports individuals and groups to consider and reconsider work, leisure and learning in the light of new information and experiences and to take both individual and collective action as a result of this. (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018, p. 20)

A definition of career education as a pedagogical framework that includes learning about values, norms and the wider society and can support reflections about a desired society from the perspective of the people involved is suggested by Hooley (2015).

These three definitions will help us explore whether there are other learning potentials attached to Laura's experience than the ones she expresses. We ask: What could have been different for Laura? And we argue that: She could have been given the opportunity to reflect together with her peers on the societal importance of the basic healthcare programme and the related jobs. Further, we argue that these shared reflections on the societal value and importance of different occupations help build social cohesion in a society.

The work by Wikstrand and Lindberg (2016) on educational and occupational norms will help us elaborate. They argue that school is an arena for both creating and reproducing norms and emphasise that this takes place through subtle processes that can be hard to notice. They suggest that career education be viewed as a pedagogical process that is critical of norms and which deals in part with becoming aware of the norms which exist and are reproduced at school (Wikstrand & Lindberg, 2016, pp. 31–32).

In Laura's case, her statements concerning the type of people ('chavs') she thinks enrol in the basic healthcare training programme clearly reflect certain societal norms. What is likely less clear to Laura is how these norms have come about. The taster programme was not organised to facilitate reflection on Laura's part regarding her experiences at the college she visited. She receives no support to further reflect on the basic healthcare programme. The activity does not help Laura broaden her horizons regarding educational programmes, jobs and herself. On the contrary, she finds her pre-existing ideas and prejudices reaffirmed; her assumptions are not challenged despite this being an explicit objective in the legislation (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2017). Laura – and potentially also her classmates – is left with the perception that working in this area is 'really terrible' and that it is only 'chavs' who would consider enrolling in the programme and working within the field. This perception can influence the norms among the students at the school and make it difficult for other students to become interested in the basic healthcare programme or, if they are, to show this interest among peers.

Reflection

Skovhus (2018) finds that many career guidance activities in Danish lower secondary school are seen by students, including Laura, as isolated, one-off events. The students do not necessarily find or create meaning just by participating in an activity such as a taster programmes. If these activities are considered part of a wider career education action and therefore expected to contribute to the expansion of the students' horizons (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson et al., 2006) and as part of career guidance processes in accordance with Hooley et al.'s definition of career guidance (2018), then they should support the students in analysing and discussing what they have learnt. Supporting students' reflection, individually and/or in groups and communities, is one way of doing this. Another is to try to ensure that students are well prepared for and subsequently reflect on their experiences from the taster programmes. However, it is equally important that such preparations and processing are not primarily focused on the students' educational choices, but on their learning. Laura's case also prompts reflection on the responsibility of the guidance professional and the teacher to challenge prejudice, such as the class prejudices expressed by Laura, and encourage solidarity rather than discrimination. This draws attention to the importance of the framing, preparation and processing of guidance activities – and on what the content of this could be.

The lack of support for reflection is interesting to note in light of the fact that literature on careers education 'highlights a requirement for some form of effective 'dialogue' and 'action' in which personal meaning is attached to concrete experiences of learning and work' (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 40). In their research Meijers, Kuijpers, and Gundy (2013) found that career dialogues at school and in the workplace (e.g. a work placement) contributed to development of career identity, learning motivation and the experienced quality of choices which 'the traditional career approach' characterised by an absence of dialogue didn't. Also, the content of the conversation was crucial (Meijers et al., 2013, p. 62). Reviews also highlight a lack of subsequent evaluation of activities that includes the young people in the evaluation processes as a potential weakness in career guidance interventions (Bergzog, 2008; Kracke, 2006). Students do not necessarily know where to direct their curiosity in relation to careers and education besides assessing whether a specific programme or field of work is 'to their taste' or not. We suggest that, in Laura's case, reflection and discussion could have centred on the significance of the healthcare profession and on the kinds of skills needed for such work and how to acquire them, as well as addressing questions about the working environment and people's different interests, values and ways of living.

LEARNING TO LIKE OR LIKING TO LEARN? CONCLUDING REMARKS

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. Nevertheless, in

Denmark, participation in taster programmes is mandatory, meaning that students, teachers, youth guidance practitioners and vocational and general upper secondary schools and colleges invest time and resources in them. There are many learning opportunities when participating in taster programmes. However, this chapter argues that in Denmark (and in other Nordic countries), such opportunities are currently not fully exploited, especially in relation to students' career learning and a possible expansion of their horizons for actions. 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. The system may look complete on paper, but in practice, and seen from the perspective of young people, it is fractured and atomized. Taster programmes, as well as many other guidance activities, must be placed within a framework of learning opportunities rather than be designed to contribute to short-term and immediate educational choices. Support of career learning requires a structured and didactic approach which can be inspired by an emancipatory understanding of career guidance.

We would like to stress that the shift in perspective from a focus primarily on educational choice to a focus on career learning may only require minor changes to how career education and guidance activities are provided. We suggest a focus on how the activities are framed and on dialogue regarding their learning potential. We also suggest supporting students' preparations for the activities in a way that helps them expand their horizons for actions. Finally, care should be taken to ensure that the students have an opportunity to share their experiences and reflect on what they have learnt with their peers.

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