

Paper proposal – Insights and Outlooks: career learning in the final years of compulsory school

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- **Type of contribution Paper or Poster or both (Paper and Poster)**

Paper

- **Title of proposal**

“Insights and Outlooks: career learning in the final years of compulsory school”

- **Information on how the contribution is related to the conference theme (up to 50 words)**

This contribution relates to the conference theme of transition, career learning and career management skills by presenting results from research into a large Danish career learning and career guidance project that took place in 2015-16 in the transitional phase between compulsory school and youth education.

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- **3 – 5 keywords**

Career learning; career competence; transition; performance evaluation; collaboration with world of work

- **General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework (up to 600 words)**

This paper presents preliminary results from a Danish research and development project on career learning in compulsory school. Both young people and society are challenged in the transition from compulsory school to youth education in Denmark.

Among pupils, studies show 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. (Juil & 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)

Thus, only 18% of the youth cohort that left grade 9 in 2016 optioned for a VET-program, whereas 73% applied for upper secondary school. (UVM, 2016) Projections of this educational pattern indicate that Denmark will be short of more than 30.000 skilled persons in the workforce by 2020.

In the light of these challenges, the national organization Local Government Denmark and the Danish Teachers' Union funded a project called "Insights and Outlooks. Career learning in the final years of compulsory school" [Udsyn i udskolingen], that focused on how pupils in grade 7 to 9 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.

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. (Fremfærd, 2014)

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.

The project was based on 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 the fundamental framework for understanding this process in four levels of learning: 1) sensing, 2) shifting 3) focusing, and 4) understanding (Law, 1996, 2001)

Seen through these four levels of learning, a successful choice of education in grade 7 to 9 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)

- **Methods/methodology (up to 400 words)**

The research was organized as a performance evaluation of the overall project. The aim was to compile reports and evaluations of local projects, collect data across the local projects and to put up a research question able to cover the complexity of the many projects. (Dahler-Larsen, 2013). This led to the

following research question: How does the encounter with a concrete educational and vocational context through the local project activities impact the participating pupils in their process of choosing a youth education?"

This general research question formed the bases for the following research process that consisted of three phases:

1. phase: the road from effort to result was rendered probable with a change theory.
2. phase: each element of the change theory is tested with data. In this project, the data was both qualitative, from interviews with central players in the project, and quantitative, from a questionnaire sent to all participating pupils.
3. phase: the collected data is analyzed, and an assessment of whether it is probable that one element in the change theory leads to the next element.

The purpose of the performance evaluation is to answer "what" and "why" questions such as:

- What has an impact (in relation to the general research question)?
- Why does some elements have an impact and others do not? (Dahler-Larsen, 2013)

When collecting the empirical data the focus was 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 individual semi-structured interviews with randomly selected pupils from grade 7-9, career counsellors, teachers, parents, representatives of youth education and local companies involved in the local projects. (Dahler-Larsen, 2013; Wengraf, 2001; Poulsen et al, 2016)

Furthermore, a survey was sent to all pupils in the projects, 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.

Each of the local projects were also 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 data.

- **Expected outcomes/results (up to 300 words)**

This paper calls two significant results to attention:

1. Overall, the pupils manifestly gained a more positive view on VET-programs through the project. This was significant through both the survey and the interviews with the pupils, and through the interviews with teachers and counsellors. 90% of the pupils expressed a more positive attitude towards VET after the project. Of the 90%, more than 40% indicated, that they consider applying for a VET-program. In a cautious

comparison, only 18% of a youth cohort had a VET-program as the number one priority when applying for youth education in 2016 (EVA, 2016). The project seems to have succeeded in broadening the educational possibilities of the pupils.

2. This change does not only come from the experience of meeting the world of work or VET-programs (the *sensing* level in Law's terminology), but also from the reflection-based work pupils and 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. Moreover, one-third of the pupils answer 'to some degree' or 'to a high degree' when asked if they have become more motivated to going to school, and equally one-third answer 'to some degree' or 'to a high degree' when asked if they have become more motivated to one or more different subjects in school. Below these numbers lies the work in the individual projects with the levels of sensing, sorting, focusing and understanding.

- **Intent of publication**

Main results are published in Danish in Poulsen, et.al. (2016).

Regarding the outcomes presented in this paper, an article in International Journal of Educational and Vocational Guidance is planned, but not yet composed.

- **References (400 words)**

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